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WRITING

for love or money

edited by

NORMAN COUSINS

THIRTY-FIVE ESSAYS REPRINTED FROM

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WRITING FOR LOVE OR MONEY

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FOREWORD

This book is concerned with writing as a craft, but it is not a "how-to" book. It neither offers keys to the literary kingdom, nor professes special knowledge of short cuts for converting writing aptitude into publishing contracts. What it does do is to deal with writing as a profession or as a serious avocation, mostly by way of discussing the problems that face the writer.

These problems are not theoretical. They are personal, in the most literal sense. Indeed, many of the chapters in this book are autobiographical, drawing upon the experiences of the authors in attempting to work out the special demands of their own fields of writing. For, whether you write for love or money, you early discover that there are as many divisions and subdivisions in writing as there are in science or in business. A writer may be a specialist on rare diseases for a medical journal or he may prepare college catalogues or he may be a novelist (even here, there is a wide range between the special skills demanded of a historical novelist and a science fiction writer). Of course, there is the tradition of the universalist in literature, from Aristotle to H. G. Wells, but that is another theme. In this book, at least, the attempt is made to discuss subjectively the problems and the opportunities that seem to be peculiar to some of the special fields of writing. The questions considered involve training, technique, relationships with publisher and public, etc. It is important to add that these questions are stated and explored rather than answered definitely, for the writer's problems begin anew with almost every new piece of work.

The chapters in this book appear together for the first time. They were published originally in *The Saturday Review of Literature*, as part of that magazine's concern with the pleasures and pains of writing. The suggestion that they be brought together for separate publication was made by Mr. Edward E. Mills, of Longmans, Green, whose effort over and above the call of publisher's duty in assisting in the preparation of this volume is gratefully acknowledged.

Though my name appears as editor of this volume, most of the actual brick-and-mortar work was undertaken by Dr. Raymond Walters, Jr., of *The Saturday Review* staff.

N. C.

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1

THE WRITER'S LIFE

HENRY SEIDEL CANBY *(born 1878), one of America's best-known men of letters, began his career as a teacher of English at Yale. In 1911 he helped Wilbur L. Cross found the* Yale Review *and acted as its assistant editor. Nine years later he was appointed editor of the "Literary Review" of the* New York Evening Post. *When the staff of the "Literary Review" established the* Saturday Review of Literature *in 1924, Dr. Canby became its editor. He resigned that position in 1936, but since 1942 has been serving as chairman of its editorial board. Dr. Canby has also been chairman of the board of judges of the Book-of-the-Month Club since that organization was begun in 1926. He has written and edited a dozen volumes on writing and is the author of several volumes of autobiography, as well as notable biographies of Whitman and Thoreau. In this essay, Dr. Canby discusses the impulses that cause a man to write, whether it be fiction, factual reporting, or criticism.*

1. Why Write?

Writers may be an irritable and temperamental *genus* of *homo sapiens*, but the writer is much more a *homo* than he is a *genus*. With certain exceptions, he responds to life very much as do his differently gifted, or his ungifted, fellow mortals. As for example, he loves to justify whatever he wants to do by a generalization, and the less unspecified the generalization the more useful he finds it.

I have never read a book or a collection of essays on writing which did not quote or paraphrase more than once Dr. Johnson's famous, and perhaps angry, dictum, that a man who did not write for money was a fool. Innumerable hack writers have called upon Dr. Johnson to defend their success with the uncritical. And many men or women of talent, even of genius, have borrowed Dr. Johnson's remark to excuse some commercialization of their work.

My own feeling is that a writer is a fool who does not write for an audience. To write just for yourself is a kind of mild paranoia, resulting from a belief that your own judgment of art or subject matter is superior to that of anyone else. But, as we all know, the self-judgment of even great writers has been notably uncertain in its values. And furthermore, to despise an audience is simply to vitiate the chief purpose of writing as Henry James, and many another, has defined it; this purpose being to satisfy an immense curiosity as to the nature and processes of life and then to communicate to others the results of observation and imaginative analysis. A writer without an audience may function, but a writer without a desire for an audience is only half a man in terms of his profession. And obviously the best way to get an audience is to sell your product to someone concerned with its distribution and willing to back desire with a reward.

But how large the audience should be, and how large, and indeed the very nature of, the reward, is a very different question. Here the repeaters of Dr. Johnson's remark oversimplify the sage's meaning, as his own career proves. That the Doctor's objectives were more complicated than the earning of an immediate cash return is quite obvious. His great satisfactions were his degree from Oxford, his royal pension, the title of the Great Lexicographer. If he was concerned only with cash, it is improbable that he would have engaged in the enormous labor

of preparing a dictionary, or devoted so much of his energy to the highly speculative venture of an acted tragedy.

To write for an audience, and to find an audience, which means usually to sell your writing, seem to be the first considerations. "And fit audience find, though few" is the right prescription, and indeed Milton's line needs no explanation. If a writer (good or bad) has touched the minds of those who will listen to him, he has reached his first objective. There is, as has been often said, no such creature as a "mute inglorious Milton." If he is mute, he is not of the Milton kind, not even of the writer's kind. Without an audience, he properly remains inglorious, because as a writer he is only half a man.

The practical question is, where does cash money come into the equation? My own advice would be to write as often as possible for money, because in a money age like ours, it is not only useful in paying bills—maybe only a few bills—but is a symbol of the reward you desire. This reward may be quite material, as, for example, in the form of a salary or contracts gained directly as the result of reputation which the publication of this or that makes for you. Yet it equally may be of a nobler, if not more useful, character. To think that what our ancestors used to call fame is not a strong motive in every able man and woman is simply to share the fallacies of the get-rich-and-be-happy school, those vulgar philosophers who crawl like maggots through the industrial age. And there is a third motive which I have never known absent in a writer, from the crudest to the most expert, from the most idealistic to the most dirt-bound fabricator of comic books or perverted historical romance. I mean self-satisfaction. A writer is first of all an articulate man. If he has articulated as well as he can and put upon paper some measurable approximation to his conception, he has that good which aside from sustenance is the most lasting satisfaction that can come to his kind. It is the occupational happiness of creative artist and skilful mediocrity alike.

If this is true, the amount of payment in cash for writing is much less important than the fact of a reward and all it implies. I think every editor knows this. How much one receives makes a lot of difference when it comes to paying bills, or to determining where you will sell your work. It may influence adversely (but by no means always) what kind of work you do. But how *much* is unimportant to you as a *writer*, by comparison with the fact that someone can get you a fit audience and is willing to pay what he can for the privilege.

Two examples may be added to these general statements of the evidence, which might be widely drawn, for this interpenetration of the desire to get a living wage from literary work, and the felt need of an audience.

Henry James is the first instance. H. J. was never a rich man. He had throughout his life a competence which was often a little below his rather modest scale of living, and sometimes frighteningly so. A hundred examples of his desire to make some money at least from his writing can be gleaned from his letters and still more of his wish to reach a public. Particularly interesting are his efforts to find an audience, which in his case meant to sell his stories, in the 1870's and early 1880's when, as he said himself, he learned to write. It may be an error to charge the number of murders, suicides, and mental crimes in the stories of this era to a desire to be sensational, and thus popular. The influence of Hawthorne was strong upon him then. Yet many of the successful stories by others of the era were written in a climate of romantic sensationalism. And how account for the incredible suicide of a worldly husband tacked on to that excellent story "Madame de Mauves"? Or the choice of a plot involving a mother's murder by neglect of a beloved child for "The Author of Beltraffio," which he said would require all the skill he had, and more, to make credible—and did. And observe the agonies of compression he suffered in shaping many of these stories in order to make them publish-

able. Was his choice of sensational climaxes justified, at least in his own mind, by his first real success, "Daisy Miller," which he told his brother was only a literary experiment, and which ended in a sensational death? More important as evidence of H. J.'s motivation is "The New York Edition" of 1907-1917. Here he undertook the vast labor of revising, with much rewriting, all the stories he wished to save, and of supplying nearly all of them with elaborate critical prefaces. He said himself that he wished to stabilize his financial position, in which the enterprise was a lamentable failure. But is it not clear that now, when toward the end of his life he had found a fit audience though few, he intensely desired, as his prefaces and recastings show, to give to this audience in all his books the perfection or near perfection which they had the right to expect? For neither preface nor, usually, his revisions made his books easier reading. On the contrary. Yet one can have no doubt that the desire to get an audience, which blended in his case with a desire to make at least some money, was a most valuable discipline for Henry James.

It is undeniably true that when the desire to make money as such outweighs any other consideration, the results may be unfortunate for literature—and sometimes for the pocketbook of the author. At the suggestion of William Dean Howells, then editor of *The Atlantic Monthly*, Mark Twain wrote the first twenty chapters of his "Life on the Mississippi," less than a third of the completed story. Howells paid him, of course, but admittedly below his current price. Twain wanted to reach the audience of the *Atlantic*, then the most cultivated in America, and said so. But he did not, when the series was concluded, publish these chapters in book form because his publishing advisers said they would make too short a book to sell at the large profits to which Twain was accustomed. Eight years later, after his *Atlantic* public had hailed his chapters as masterly, and his growing reputation made the success of a larger book

certain, he decided to expand them by taking a trip on the Mississippi. He did so, and added forty rather dreary chapters, for his inspiration had faded. Result: "Life on the Mississippi" as we read it today is like a brilliant procession with a bedraggled tail of stragglers and advertising floats. Even though it is one of the great books of American literature, it is a masterpiece manqué, such as only a great writer, almost devoid of artistic consciousness, who sometimes wrote for an audience and often only for cash, could have perpetrated.

The readers of the essays which follow will find many other conditions for true success. Since writing is a communication of life, its problems are as broad as life, and its secrets are numerous. I have tried here to pluck out one strand of critical truth, which has run through the creative art of words, through poetry, criticism, fiction, history, journalism, wherever and whenever man's imagination makes words its instrument.

JONATHAN NORTON LEONARD *(born 1903) is Science Editor of* Time. *From his graduation from Harvard in 1925 to 1943, when he joined the staff of* Time, *he was a free-lance writer. Besides writing a half-dozen books on Latin-American and scientific subjects, he contributed short stories to the* Saturday Evening Post, Collier's, *and other national magazines. His essay on "writer's schools" is an outgrowth of the latter phase of his career. Although the economy of the United States has undergone a considerable inflation since Mr. Leonard wrote in 1935, this has not outdated his general analysis of the market for fiction and the practices of the story schools.*

2. *Learning How To Write*

One summer, in the hope of learning how to write fiction, I attended a "writer's school" in a nice New England village. On the whole I spent an agreeable six weeks. I made the acquaintance of an attractive female textile worker. I climbed a mountain. I gained ten pounds.

But the "course" itself had a curious effect upon me. It left me wholly disgusted with all fiction. I did the work and was praised by the professor. I constructed a large number of characters and fitted them into a rigid mechanical form. But when I got through, I didn't write another story for nearly nine years. Such was my personal experience with writer's schools.

I believe firmly that if I had not gone to that nice New England village, I should have sold my first story at least five years sooner.

My own experience, of course, is not necessarily typical. I shall not refer to it again. In this essay I shall try to evaluate story teaching by a sort of statistical analysis, and by collecting opinions of other writers.

Before I go any farther, I should like to define what I mean by a "story school." I do not mean a course in story-writing at a legitimate college or university. This is a reasonable way to teach English composition. It is possible to find a good deal of fault with the methods used and the results accomplished, but at least the teachers are people of good intention. They don't raise false hopes of large financial success, and they don't confuse the student with too much emphasis upon mechanism and plotting.

Neither do I mean the coaches, critics, and agents, some of whom give personal attention to authors and manuscripts. Nor do I mean the fiction courses connected with university "schools of journalism." According to the U. S. Office of Education there are thirty of these schools. Their primary purpose is to train reporters and newspaper editors. They have swamped the newspaper business to such an extent that oftentimes their graduates find it difficult to get jobs. But this is also the case with many other types of professional school. The results may be disappointing, but the motives are noble.

There is nothing noble, however, about the commercial, advertised story schools—mostly correspondence schools—which promise fame and fortune to every would-be writer who pays them the requisite fee. Practically all these poor creatures are doomed to disappointment. They can't sell their stuff. The market is far too small. The schools know this perfectly well, but year after year they continue to extract large amounts of money from the flattest wallets in the nation. In

return they give practically nothing but heartbreak and rejection slips.

I am not going to waste my limited space in attacking individual schools. Each school claims in defense that it is "different," that it does actually "train" its suckers successfully. I shall attempt to head off this rejoinder by considering the schools as a group.

The story school business is founded upon two fundamental popular delusions. The first is the widely-held belief that there is lots of big money in stories, especially short stories. The second is the conviction that "anybody" can write them if properly "trained." The story schools have fostered and utilized these delusions. Their advertising is largely responsible for the thousands upon thousands of pathetic strivers who spend their time and money trying to find the pot of gold at the end of the story rainbow.

Practically all of the schools advertise in the same way. The first step is to convince the prospect that a very large amount of easy money is waiting for him behind the editor's desk. One school, for instance, gives an idyllic picture of the successful writer's life, its independence and earning power. The effect on the poor farmhands and housewives who read such statements may be guessed without difficulty. Like Christ on "the high place," they have been shown all the kingdoms of the earth. They at once begin to ask what chance they have of acquiring this wealth themselves.

The story schools generally provide the answer in the next paragraph: *anybody* can write successfully. One school says it in so many words, disposing at once of the possibility that there may be such a thing as inborn talent. Others may be more lengthy about it, but they all come to the pleasant conclusion that training and hard work are the only requisites. Most of them ridicule the idea that any sort of talent or education is necessary. Just leave it to them.

When they think they've convinced the prospective pupil that big money awaits the dullest aspirant, the schools bring out their testimonials and success stories. Well-known names are conspicuously absent. Most of the testimonials tell of single sales to pulp magazines or farm papers. Often articles and news pieces are included, although these have nothing whatever to do with story writing. Dates are seldom given, which suggests that the sales were made years ago. Some former pupils state that they are "selling regularly," but I have yet to see convincing evidence that any one of them at the present time is making a decent, dependable living by writing stories.

The schools seem to realize that their testimonials are not very impressive. To correct this flaw they dazzle the prospective student with the names and often the photographs of famous writers who have had no connection whatever with the school or its course. In the booklet of one school, for instance, appears a brief account of a famous author's career. It does not state that he was "trained" by the school—as of course he was not—but a careless or ignorant reader would be likely to count him as a graduate. Some schools have managed to get permission to use the names of established writers, the Lord knows how. Often they try to convince prospective students that they taught these men how to write.

After the student has paid his fee, which ranges from $12.50 to more than $100, he sets to work on the course. This generally consists of weekly lessons or "assignments." The student is told to write about incidents from his own life, to describe a friend or acquaintance, to practise dialogue. Each course has its special features. Some go in for "scientific psychology." Some ask the candidate to submit plots. Some give outlines for amplification. The more expensive courses provide an elaborate textbook, usually by the professor himself.

I am not going to waste time describing the courses. It is not important that some are "better" than others, for all of them

are practically worthless. It is my personal opinion that they are actually harmful. They either confuse the would-be writer with technical complications or they train him to follow a pat formula, to the destruction of any native literary charm he may possess.

I know that the story schools have been denounced many times before. They are always denounced in professional writing circles whenever the subject comes up. But I think a little statistical analysis will be more convincing than any amount of indignant opinion.

First of all, let us determine how many schools there are. This figure depends to some extent upon the definition. With the aid of various government bureaus and the so-called "writer's magazines" (which few real writers ever read) I have collected twenty-eight schools which offer correspondence courses in short-story writing. Some of them will also teach other kinds of writing as well, but because the large majority of would-be writers aim at the short story, they have little call for such service.

These schools are of various sizes. One of them "trains" 800 students a year and receives from each the good sum of $85. Another enrolls fifty students a month, 600 per year. In general, the schools are not very free with their figures. They speak vaguely of "thousands" or "hundreds." But I think I am very safe in assuming that the schools average about 500 students a year, some bigger, some smaller. I don't see how they can pay for their advertising or support their staffs on a smaller number. And if each pupil pays an average of $30, the schools extract at least $420,000 every year from the short-story hopefuls of the nation. Not included in this list are several large general correspondence schools which offer courses in story writing, but to remain incontestably conservative, I shall leave it at a round half-million per year.

Half a million dollars a year from 10,000 hopefuls! This figure is a sizable tax upon the pitifully small resources of would-be writers. Now I am going to try to estimate what return these poor aspirants get upon their investment.

Let's take a look at the magazine business. There are several thousand magazines—the exact number depending upon the definition of the term. Some have vast circulations. Some pay large sums for fiction. But this impressive set of facts does not mean that there is a living in the business for large numbers of short-story writers.

In the first place, the overwhelming majority of magazines use no fiction whatever. Most of them are trade papers of various kinds, generally staff-written and usually devoting themselves chiefly to short articles praising the products of their advertisers. Another large class comprises religious, fraternal, and other special-interest publications. They may use a small amount of fiction here and there, but they pay little or nothing.

There are plenty of people supported by these magazines, but they are not story writers. They are usually staff experts on taxis, diesel engines, Holstein cattle, or Baptist missions. For the professional story writer there are only two serious markets—the "slicks" and the "pulps." Of these the "slicks" come first.

Most important to writers are the "big circulation" weeklies. There are three of them—the *Saturday Evening Post, Collier's,* and *This Week.* The *Post* uses about 225 short stories a year and pays from $500 up. The "up" is very high, but $1200 each will certainly cover the average. *Collier's* and *This Week* are somewhat lower. The group as a whole does not pay out more than $750,000 for short fiction. Count the stories, consult agents, and figure it out for yourself if you don't believe me.

Next come the "big" monthlies (*Cosmopolitan, Redbook,*

Good Housekeeping, etc.). There are ten of them. They each use about six stories a month and pay an average of $700. Their total is not above $500,000 a year. Besides these, there are several "quality" monthlies (*Harper's, Atlantic*, etc.). They use a few stories, but they pay less than the big monthlies. We'll put them down for a total of $30,000. It's a compliment.

Finally come the pulps (*Black Mask, Ranch Romances, Astounding Stories*, etc.). The Authors' Guild lists forty, including those mentioned here, as wholly reliable. Many others, of a different kind, however, are fly-by-nights with uncertain addresses and trick bank accounts. But we'll include them all —about ninety. They use around seventy million words of fiction a year, for which they pay one cent a word. A few pay slightly more, but many pay less, and many are largely staff-written at very low rates. Their total is $700,000, which includes "novels" and "novelettes" as well as short stories.

This ends the list of primary markets. If the short-story writer can't hit one of these, he'd better go out of the business, for he can't make a decent and dependable living anywhere else. The juveniles don't pay enough to matter. Neither do the religious or special-interest publications. Newspaper syndicates use very few first-run short stories and pay very little.

There are, to be sure, a number of "allied" and "secondary" markets. Chief of these is book publication, foreign magazines, and movies. The first two are very small. Few short stories are collected into books. Few sell in England or on the Continent, and the income from this source is overbalanced many times by the money paid to foreign writers. As for the movies, they do not buy many short stories. They buy plays, serials, best-selling novels. Few short stories contain enough material to make a full-length movie. But to cover the "allied" and "secondary" markets I am going to add 50 per cent to my base amount. This is more than enough to head off quibbles.

Let's see where we stand. I'll pretend to be a statistician and put it in tabular form.

"Big" weeklies	$ 750,000
"Big" monthlies	500,000
"Quality" monthlies	30,000
Pulps	700,000
Total	$1,980,000
Plus 50%	990,000
Grand total	$2,970,000

That's all. Three million dollars, of course, is serious money, but a $3,000,000 industry is an extremely small one for a country the size of the United States. Short stories rank a little above fishnets ($2,680,000, 1931), but they fall well below the annual cranberry crop ($3,900,000, 1931). The vast amounts to be made in the business are a popular delusion and a tribute to the power of the printed word. There is just as much money in fishnets or cranberries, and much less competition.

Now how many professionals will $3,000,000 support? When a writer becomes well established, particularly in the "slick" magazines, his income is apt to be rather large. Therefore, it certainly would not be correct to allow each writer less than $3,000 a year. At this rate $3,000,000 will support 1000 writers.

It is already obvious that short-story writing is not "for the many," as the schools like to assert. Even if the profession were filled *entirely* from the ranks of story-school graduates, it would accommodate only a minute fraction of the ten thousand "trained" every year.

Now how many of the thousand writers *have* been school-trained? To determine this I wrote to the nineteen authors whose short stories appeared in five recent, consecutive issues of *The Saturday Evening Post.* I got fifteen replies—a very

good score, as any questionnaire dispatcher will testify. I asked them if they had ever taken a course in story writing. They all answered that they had not. I asked for opinions on such courses. Three said nothing. The rest thought they were either useless or harmful. Several were very picturesque and emphatic. One man contributed information about fourteen successful writing friends. None had taken a course.

I supplemented this questionnaire with inquiries among my personal friends and their acquaintances. In all I gathered information about thirty successful "slick" writers. Absolutely none had been trained by the story schools. Absolutely none had a good word to say for them.

I do not consider thirty out of six hundred "slick" writers a sufficient number to base my statistics upon. So I am going to be very generous with the schools. I shall assume that if I had made one more inquiry, it would have been positive. This will give the schools one writer in thirty-one, or less than twenty out of the six hundred. They will get one thirty-first part of the "slick" money, as estimated above, plus 50 per cent. Which works out to $62,000 a year.

I followed the same method with the pulps. As I expected, the schools did a little better in this field. The pulps are by far the easiest market to hit, but even here the schools supplied only one writer in ten. All together they cannot earn more than $105,000 a year.

Let's have another table:

		PER YEAR
Slick money (plus 50%)	$1,920,000	
1/31 to graduates		$ 62,000
Pulp money (plus 50%)	1,050,000	
1/10 to graduates		105,000
Total to graduates		$167,000

Allowing $3,000 a year to each writer, this sum will support in modest comfort no more than fifty-four professionals. And if each writer remains in the business for fifteen years—an extremely high vocational mortality rate—there will be room for *less than four* new story-school graduates per year.

I repeat. Each year *less than four* story-school graduates establish themselves among the thousand professionals. More than 10,000 hopefuls are lured by promises of easy fame and fortune. They pay their money, which few can afford, for what they have been led to believe is genuine vocational training. And *only four* receive a living wage for their investment in money and effort.

This isn't a very encouraging prospect for the hordes of story aspirants, and I'm afraid I haven't helped them much except in a negative sense, by warning them. My intentions were good, however. So I am going to devote the rest of this essay to suggesting how they may look for genuine assistance, if they think they need it. Most of my advice, I'm afraid, will be negative also. But that can't be helped.

The basic trouble is the extreme disproportion between the number of people who want to write and the number who do write or have other legitimate connection with the business. There are probably at least a hundred seekers after advice to every person genuinely qualified to give it.

Most of the writers I know were in some sort of contact with the writing business long before they achieved any kind of success. They had worked for magazines or publishers. They had friends who wrote. They had taught in colleges or they had started with books, some classes of which are much easier to sell than short stories.

So the best thing to do, I think, is to sneak up on a professional in some adroit way. An editor or an experienced writer can give certain types of advice. It won't make a "millionaire

author" out of a farmhand or even out of a Ph.D. with no gift for writing, but it may remove a few of the technical obstacles.

This justifies to some extent such institutions as the Bread Loaf Conference, where successful professionals may be consulted by hopeful aspirants. I have heard several favorable comments upon Bread Loaf. One very successful writer says that 5 per cent of those who go there are capable of being helped. These *are* helped to some extent. The other 95 per cent are beyond help. They merely "go home and tell the village reporter about the writers they have met." This is pleasant, I suppose. Some of the students are attractive young women, which is pleasant for the writers.

Failing such contacts, I can think of no promising way to proceed. There are, to be sure, a number of former editors who act as coaches and critics. I have heard of two who seem to be approved by writers who ought to know their business. But the would-be writer should be extremely cautious. Don't fall for the "successful story writer" who has gone into the coaching business. If he were actually successful, he wouldn't bother with such stuff. The amount of legitimate money to be made in this way is very small.

To come right down to it, the only sound advice is rather uninspiring. All magazine writers agree that the way to learn to write is to write. Read the magazines. Any person of intelligence can see what they want and what they don't want. If he can't, he shouldn't be trying to write. Then send the manuscript to the magazine you think it fits best. It will be read all right, the first page at least.

Technical advice from a genuine professional—writer or editor—may be useful in some cases. But it's hard to get, and it won't help a person who hasn't the necessary ability. Story-writing after all, even pulp-writing, is an art of a sort. A story

is the product of the writer's personality, his feeling, his sense of language, his observation, his experience. Mechanical technique is only a small part of the total. You can train a man to write correct English. Universities do this. But you can't train him to tell an interesting story.

HENRY SEIDEL CANBY *For some information concerning Dr. Canby's life and career in American letters, see the biographical note preceding his article "Why Write?" on page 3.*

3. Take Stock of Your Abilities

It is very strange to what tasks able writers will devote themselves when, to the reader with a certain detachment of view, they seem to be neglecting the special work for which their talent is most eminently suited. One thinks of Coleridge giving, as he himself tells us, "twenty years incessant thought and at least ten years positive labor to the one in six volumes Logosophia, or on the Logos in man and Deity, forming a compleat and perfectly original system of Logic, Natural Philosophy, and Theology." How well posterity might have spared that mountainous accumulation if Coleridge could only have concluded "Christabel"! How easily the best minds are led astray on what constitutes a work worthy of their talents. Coleridge undoubtedly fancied himself as a great philosopher, whereas he was actually possessed of a certain unique vein in poetry that he hardly explored. He wasted much of his time in verse writing formal and inflated odes. Even in that medium itself he but rarely found his own particular Pierian spring; though he messed around a good deal in turbid waters.

We mistrust most greatly ambitious schemes of writing.

They are usually projected by those who have either not discovered where their own particular talents may lie or by those so obtuse to the reason for good writing that they confuse hugely ambitious effort with probable artistic stature. To this, as to all generalizations, there are plenty of exceptions. But the amount of dullness in print would be considerably reduced if ambition in writers did not so often blind them to their own place in the general scheme. You may be just the boy or girl to attempt a trilogy or an epic; but the odds are that the world will remember you for the creation of a single character or for a quatrain.

This may all seem very discouraging and depressing to youth. But we are not exactly talking to youth. It is the prerogative of youth to go "all out" for the great attempt, and we shouldn't have much respect for youth in any of the arts that didn't do so. But the time must come when, after a good deal of experimentation, one particular "line" suggests itself as that along which the natural abilities of a particular mind function most freshly and freely. Then is the time, at least for a while, to cleave to that line and thoroughly explore the possibilities of a certain kind of writing. We do not mean that a writer should confine himself to so narrow a field that he will end merely by repeating himself, however charmingly (as more than a few have done!), but his growth will be more natural from the perhaps less ambitious to the more ambitious if, through his earlier work, he strives to find that province most fundamentally his.

There are many sad spectacles in the history of literature, and one most certainly is that of the man whose mind may have been so brilliantly versatile as to preclude his ever really "finding himself." In this quarter and in that he has sparkled and gone. He has flung himself wholeheartedly into various enterprises. Probably he has eventually been most beguiled by the work for which he was not nearly so well fitted as for a

comparatively neglected medium. "Your best friends won't tell you," because they don't know. And friends may be a writer's worst enemies. They admire that in his work which is most germane to their own thought, without any reference to his natural abilities. They would rather he did this or that to please them than develop along his own peculiar line. So would a good many editors and publishers. It is old news that through the success of some one book a writer has been chained to his second-best for life, if he was trying to make a living by writing.

Only the author himself can really get to know himself and the claim he should stake in the land of literature. Writing is the most subtle and complicated test of any man's intellectual honesty. You cannot possibly write as you would like to write unless you are as honest as possible with yourself. What you put down must represent your truest convictions at the time, or it has no chance to live. That is precisely why so much writing dies an early death. The truth is not in it. It may seem glittering at the time, but the glitter tarnishes all too easily. Honesty, as near as may be, is then the first touchstone for a writer trying to find himself; and beyond that it would not seem so hard for him to find the field in which he works most gladly. If you do not enjoy your work your readers are not going to enjoy it. It is easy for us to know that we prefer, say, carrots to onions, or, say, tennis to golf. And yet many a writer who would have been a more than fair lyrical poet has elected to be a volume-after-volume realistic novelist; and many a poet would have done a deal better in the field of the novel. Those are extreme instances, but there are thousands less extreme.

One may say that there are a great many people who would have made as good doctors or lawyers as writers. That also is true; but that is not precisely what we are discussing. Writing is less and less a profession apart. What we have been advising

is that if one wishes to be a writer it would be as well to study carefully one's particular qualifications in respect to one's ambition. Experiment will probably be necessary; but if eventually one fishes up one's own murex, let it be recognized and let it dictate a course of action consonant with the conditions of its discovery.

JESSE STUART *(born 1907) is a native of Riverton, Kentucky, and continues to live there. So that he can afford to write the kind of stories and books that please himself, he teaches school; for a time he served as superintendent of schools at Greenup, Kentucky. His book "Taps for Private Tussie" won the Thomas Jefferson Southern Award for 1943. His shorter pieces have appeared in magazines ranging from the* Atlantic Monthly *to the* Ladies Home Journal. *Ralph Thompson once observed in the* New York Times *that "there aren't many originals in American writers; Jesse Stuart is one of the few." The comments of Mr. Stuart that follow serve to supplement Dr. Canby's essay on the desirability of a writer's selecting a subject and a style that are congenial.*

4. *Write To Please Yourself*

I cannot write anything according to pattern. That is, I have to think the thing out for myself. I learned this one thing in college. During those days I wanted to write poetry. And when I wrote a batch of poems I'd take them to one of my English professors; if he praised them I was happy. If he condemned them, I felt badly about it. If he suggested that I throw them aside and "try to write like Shakespeare" I did it. I believed everything my English teachers told me for the period of my college and university days. Suddenly, I rebelled. I rebelled, for each one of them had a different opinion about

poetry and I knew somebody was wrong. I returned from the university with a determination to write something to suit myself (I burned five hundred poems that others had told me how to write) and I wrote "Man with a Bull-Tongue Plow." And this idea occurred to me which has been a part of my everyday philosophy! "Write something to suit yourself and many people will like it; write something to suit everybody and scarcely anyone will care for it."

If anybody starts telling me what to write, how to write, and when to write, there is something in me that immediately rebels. For instance, I was told that I couldn't write a sonnet in college. That is one of the main reasons why I use this medium despite its hampering effects. (I hope I've loosened it up a bit.) I was told that I couldn't write a short story and I believed my English instructor at that time. Later I thought that I would see. In two days I wrote three short stories. Results: *Story Magazine*, *Southern Review*, and *The American Mercury* accepted these three stories, and all three stories were on Edward J. O'Brien's Honor Roll for 1936.

Since then I've had approximately three hundred short stories published in quality magazines and books. And I was told that I couldn't write a novel, told by college English instructors and by critics.

I think it is the nature of the American people to do a thing when they have been told they can't do it. Many of us remember prohibition days when people were told they couldn't drink anything stronger than lemonade. During prohibition days, in this region of America, moonshine licker became a big-time industry. When I was principal of a couple of large high schools, I never put a sign on the school yard to tell the students not to step on the grass for I knew they would do it just to see how the touch of the grass felt to their feet. I removed the signs from the school yard and suggested they didn't walk on the

young grass until it was well-rooted in the ground. I don't think a student thereafter stepped on the grass unless it was by accident. I did this because I knew how I'd felt when I was told that I couldn't write a short story, a sonnet, or a novel.

ELMER DAVIS *(born 1890), news commentator for the American Broadcasting Company, was director of the Office of War Information during World War II. A native of Indiana, Mr. Davis was graduated from Franklin College and studied at Oxford as a Rhodes scholar. He spent ten years on the staff of the* New York Times *and later was a prolific writer of short stories and serials for the big circulation magazines. Mr. Davis' remarks on the economics of authorship were originally delivered as the fifth of the Bowker Memorial Lectures at the New York Public Library.*

5. *Writing and the Butcher's Bill*

Like most of their fellow men, writers are in the habit of having families; indeed, a great many of them have two or three families, and have to put down alimony as the first item in the budget. There are three ways in which an author may pay his butcher's bills. He may support himself by his writing; or he may have a job, and write in his spare time; or he may have so much money, either by inheritance or by marriage, that he need not worry about the financial return from his labors, but can conscientiously devote himself to doing the best work that he can.

Theoretically, this last should be the ideal situation; practically, it doesn't always work out that way. Tolstoy and Proust, for example, were writers who had plenty of money and were

thus able to devote themselves single-mindedly to doing the best work they could. No one, I think, could reasonably claim that either of them was harmed in any way by being freed from money worries; but in this country there are one or two cases—to name them would be invidious, since this is a conjectural diagnosis—of very considerable talents which have never produced the sort of work that might have been expected; and which possibly failed to go as deep as they should, to get the rounded picture that would have made their work really first-rate instead of top flight second-rate, because those writers never knew what it was like to wonder where your next meal was coming from, or what your family would live on if you died suddenly. To large areas of human experience and emotion these writers were blank; and good as they were, they were not good enough—as Tolstoy was—to fill the gap by the intuition of genius.

So this economic solution is not always as satisfactory as it seems; and in any case it is available to very few authors. A good deal of good writing has been produced by authors who had jobs, in their spare time; but that implies a job that is not too exacting. The British civil service used to provide such jobs, yet most of the good writing in England was done either by men of means or by men who made a living out of what they wrote; and most jobs in this country are apt to leave a man too tired to do very good work after his day's work is over—especially as the jobs most congenial to people with a bent for writing are apt to be writing jobs, which leave a man tired of writing by dinner time, and not in the best condition to begin writing what he lovingly regards as his good stuff, after dinner. Some shrewd writers, recognizing this, have deliberately selected jobs as far from writing as possible; the early novels of Mr. Elliot Paul—very good novels, too—were written in the evening after he had finished his day's work as a plumber; and I know a playwright of promise who, having to earn his

living this summer, got himself a job as a stone mason rather than take a desk in a publicity office. But again, few authors have the aptitude and training needed by stone masons or plumbers.

Most of the after-hour writing is probably done by newspapermen—or by teachers, whose job with its long summer vacation looks as if it ought to be ideal for the writer. Sometimes it has proved so, but more often in the old days than now. Professor Longfellow became a best seller in his spare time at Harvard, and Professor Moody wrote some excellent plays in his spare time at Chicago. But in those days the pressure of academic demands for academic production was less intense; nowadays the young assistant professor with an idea for a novel which might give him something of a reputation, but is unlikely to bring him in very much money, is apt to find that his prospects of supporting his family are better if he spends the summer annotating the novels of some forgotten writer of the past—the well-known writers of the past having already been pretty well annotated to death—than if he writes a novel of his own which his academic superiors would be unlikely to regard as an original contribution to human knowledge.

Schoolteachers, if under less pressure to produce, are nowadays under an increasing pressure to absorb; continuance in their jobs usually requires that they spend their summers acquiring more credits at some teachers college. So not many of them any more can follow the example of Mathilde Eiker, whose excellent and never adequately recognized novels were written in her vacations from her work as a high-school teacher. Most of us have to begin by writing in spare time while we live on a job; but almost all of us have found, if we attained any success as writers, that sooner or later we had to quit the job or quit writing.

Which brings us to the author who makes a living by his trade; and who usually finds after a few years that he must

make a choice between quantity and quality, or—more deplorably still—that there is no choice, that quantity is all he is any longer capable of producing. For this condition no one can be blamed; and, as observed earlier, it may be argued that it produces a larger amount of good writing, absolutely if not relative to the total mass, than would be turned out if it were not for the prospects of opulence that the magazines and the movies hold out to writers who happen to be able to produce the sort of thing that these markets demand. Nevertheless, it cannot be disputed that the conditions of the industry today do encourage an enormous overproduction, do make it practically impossible for a writer to retire into dignified silence when he has said all he has to say, or to lie fallow for a while if he is going through a period of sterility. He can still do this, of course, if he has sufficient fortitude not only to starve and to see his family starve, but to resist the importunities of his friends in the magazine business who tell him they are counting on him for some more stories; but few authors have such hardihood.

I doubt if authors ever enjoyed starving. Shakespeare, no doubt, wrote because he wanted to write; but whether he would have kept it up if all he had got out of it was a crust of bread in a garret is open to some doubt. At any rate he made a great deal of money out of it, for his time—enough money to enjoy a luxury beyond the means of most authors, the luxury of being able to quit when he was through. It must be added, however, that one of the surest proofs of Shakespeare's genius, something that sets him apart from the overwhelming majority of authors of his own time or any other, is that he knew when he was through and had sense enough to quit; instead of keeping on to the end of his life, as some other writers of originally high ability have done, pouring out a continual flood of work of continually poorer quality.

Consider the history of the average writer—particularly the

average fiction writer, for fiction is one of the easiest ways to make a living by writing. Sometimes he begins by aiming at the lucrative magazine market directly; more often he gets his start by writing a novel. His first novel is likely to be something that he had heavily on his mind, and if he has any stuff it may be pretty good. Accordingly, it is likely to get good reviews; it is no longer so certain to be saluted as great as was practically every novel fifteen years ago, but the critics will at worst say that the freshness of the theme compensates for lack of sureness in the treatment. The reviews will be good and the author will believe them absolutely—except of course that he will be unable to see why anybody should have found a lack of sureness in the treatment. At any rate, he will be convinced that a bright future is opening before him. He writes another novel—like his first one, in his spare time, at night after his work at the office is over, buoyed up by youth and confidence; and if that one too gets good reviews, if it sells a little better, then the virus of an incurable disease has laid hold on him. He is an author; and it begins to appear an unendurable indignity that a writer of his quality has to appear at a desk at nine o'clock every morning and take orders from somebody else till five in the afternoon. So he quits his job, and begins to make his living as an author.

Now the chances are that for the first year or two, or three, he does pretty well. His books have created something of a stir, they may even have had something of a sale; and the reputation they have earned for him has brought magazine editors around to see him. For a while he gets along very well indeed; and then one morning he wakes up to the realization that he is through, that he has said all he had to say, and that there is no more where that came from.

Now the chances are that he is not through at all, or rather that he is through only for a while. Every writer knows those recurrent periods of feeling that he will never have another

idea or be able to write another line; and in the course of time he snaps out of it, after he has taken enough time off to recharge his batteries. But if he has been making good money and has spent most of it—as he probably has, for when the money is coming in it is inconceivable, to the average author, that this sort of thing may not go on forever—he finds it very difficult to take time off while the expenses are going on at the same old rate; and while magazine editors are expecting him to produce at the same rate. For what the magazine editor wants is something that will build up, or keep up, the circulation; and well-known names, well known to the readers of that magazine as well as to the general public, are the thing that is most likely to do it. Accordingly, if you sell any given magazine ten stories in a year, you will get more for each story than if you sold them only three stories a year. It may well be that three stories, three good stories, are all you have in you that year; but if your production falls off your price is likely, sooner or later, to fall off too. So you write your three good stories; and then you use the tricks of the trade that you have learned, and your knowledge of the tastes of the editors of that particular magazine, to knock off seven more stories that are good enough—good enough to sell with the advantage of a name well known to the magazine's readers, even though they might be sent back if they came up from Joe Blotz of Podunk Corners.

Such is the history of most writers, whether they begin with that dangerously successful novel or by writing for the magazines direct, in the hope of thereby laying up enough money to afford to write novels. Twenty years ago there were fewer pulp magazines than there are now; but some of those magazines, edited by such men as Bob Davis, Arthur Sullivant Hoffman, Kenneth Littauer, and the late Charles Agnew MacLean, were of much higher quality than any of today's pulps with perhaps one exception. In those days most writers got their

start with the pulps, and in those days you could compress the history of almost any successful writer into a sentence: He wrote his best stuff for the pulps at two or three cents a word, and spent the rest of his life rewriting it for the slicks, for ten or twenty times as much money. Not so many successful writers now come up from the pulps; a man who has the peculiar talent demanded by the pulps of today is apt to go on writing for them under ten or twelve aliases. But the general principle is still true. Whereunto shall the typical author be likened? Unto an oil well, which, when you first shoot it, blows off uproariously—a gusher; but whose flow gradually slackens until eventually you have to pump. Much of the work seen today in the magazines under well-known names is proof that a skilful operative can keep the pump going a long time.

To all this there are exceptions; and one of them deserves notice, as a unique example of self-abnegation. Miss Margaret Mitchell, as we all know, wrote a novel that made a great deal of money. Most of that money was made in one year, and accordingly the Treasury took the greater part of it. Nevertheless Miss Mitchell was in a position to cash in on her success; she knew perfectly well, by all the canons and precedents of the literature industry, that any of the big magazines would pay her $50,000, or maybe more, for her next serial—sight unseen, no matter what its theme or its quality. Good or bad, she could get fifty thousand for it; and for the serial after that, and so on, for at the very least ten years. But so far Miss Mitchell has not produced any serial, though years have gone by; alone of authors of whom we have knowledge, she seems resolved not to write any more till she has something more to say. This attitude is worthy of a Nobel Prize.

STEPHEN LEACOCK *(1869-1944) lived a double life: somewhat gravely as head of the Department of Economics and Political Science at McGill University in Montreal, and more merrily as one of the most entertaining and widely read writers of humor in the English language. Although he was born at Swanmoor, Hampshire, England, Mr. Leacock was taken to an Ontario farm at the age of seven. Upon graduation from the University of Toronto in 1891 he spent eight years in what he called "the most dreary, most thankless, and worst paid profession in the world"—school-teaching. Graduate work at McGill led to a Ph.D. degree and eventually a professorship there. His books were divided between political economy and humor; he said he found it easy to write the former—"solid, instructive stuff, fortified by facts and figures"; but writing the latter, "something out of one's own mind, worth reading for its own sake, is an arduous contrivance, only to be achieved in fortunate moments, few and far between." His amusing advice on how to make an index has been published in his book, "My Remarkable Uncle and Other Sketches" (1942).*

6. How To Make an Index

Readers of books, I mean worthwhile readers, like those who read this journal, will understand how many difficulties center round the making of an Index. Whether to have an Index at all? Whether to make it a great big one, or just

a cute little Index on one page? Whether to have only proper names, or let it take in ideas—and so on. In short, the thing reaches dimensions that may raise it to the rank of being called the Index Problem, if nothing is done about it.

Of course one has to have an Index. Authors themselves would prefer not to have any. Having none would save trouble, and compel reviewers to read the whole book instead of just the Index. But the reader needs it. Otherwise he finds himself looking all through the book, forwards and then backwards, and then plunging in at random, in order to read out to a friend what it was that was so darned good about Talleyrand. He doesn't find it, because it was in another book.

So let us agree, there must be an Index. Now comes the first trouble. What is the real title or name of a thing or person that has three or four? Must you put everything three or four times over in the Index, under three or four names? No, just once, so it is commonly understood; and then for the other joint names, we put what is called a cross reference, meaning, see this, or see that. It sounds good in theory, but in practice it leads to such results as—*Talleyrand, see Perigord* . . . and when you hunt this up, you find—*Perigord, Bishop of, see Talleyrand.* The same effect can be done flat out, with just two words, as *Lincoln, see Abraham . . . Abraham, see Lincoln.* But even that is not so bad because at least it's a closed circle. It comes to a full stop. But compare the effect, familiar to all research students, when the circle is not closed. Thus, instead of just seeing Abraham and seeing Lincoln, the unclosed circle runs like this, each item being hunted up alphabetically, one after the other —*Abraham, see Lincoln . . . Lincoln, see Civil War . . . Civil War, see United States . . . United States, see America . . . America, see American History . . . American History, see also Christopher Columbus, New England, Pocahontas, George Washington* . . . the thing will finally come to rest somehow or other with the dial pointing at *see Abraham Lincoln.*

But there is worse even than that. A certain kind of conscientious author enters only proper names, but he indexes them every time they come into his book, no matter how they come in, and how unimportant is the context. Here is the result in the Index under the letter N:

Napoleon—17, 26, 41, 73, 109, 110, 156, 213, 270, 380, 460. You begin to look them up. Here are the references:

Page 17—"Wore his hair like Napoleon."
Page 41—"as fat as Napoleon."
Page 73—"not so fat as Napoleon."
Page 109—"was a regular Napoleon at Ping-pong."
Page 110—"was not a Napoleon at Ping-pong."
Page 156—"Napoleon's hat."
Pages 213, 270, 380, 460, not investigated.

So to get away from this difficulty, of an insignificant reference, you decide to make an Index in which each item shall carry with it an explanation, a sort of little epitome of what is to be found in the book. The reader consulting the volume can open to the Index, look at a reference, and decide whether or not he needs to turn the subject up in the full discussion in the book. A really good Index will in most cases itself give the information wanted. There you have, so to speak, the Perfect Index.

Why I know about this is because I am engaged at present in making just such an Index in connection with a book on gardening, which I am writing this summer. To illustrate what is meant, I may be permitted to quote the opening of the book, and its conversion into Index Material:

As Abraham Lincoln used to say, when you want to do gardening, you've got to take your coat off, a sentiment shared by his fellow enthusiast, the exiled Napoleon, who, after conquering all Europe, retaining only the sovereignty of the spade in his garden plot at St. Helena, longed only for more fertilizer.

As arranged for the Index, the gist, or essential part of this sentence, the nucleus, so to speak, appears thus—

Abraham Lincoln: habit of saying things, p. 1; wants to do gardening, p. 1; takes his coat off, p. 1; his enthusiasm, p. 1; compared with Napoleon, p. 1.

Coat: taken off by Abraham Lincoln, p. 1.

Gardening: Lincoln's views on, p. 1; need of taking coat off, for, p. 1; Napoleon's enthusiasm over, p. 1; see also under spade, sovereignty, St. Helena.

Napoleon: his exile, p. 1; conquers Europe, p. 1; enthusiastic over gardening, p. 1; compared with Lincoln; retains sovereignty of spade, p. 1; plots at St. Helena, p. 1; longs for fertilizer, p. 1; see also Europe, St. Helena, fertilizer, seed catalogue, etc., etc. . . .

That's as far as I've got with the sentence. I still have to write up *sovereignty*, *spade*, *sentiment*, *share*, *St. Helena*, and everything after S. There's no doubt it's the right method, but it takes time somehow to get the essential nucleus of the gist, and express it. I see why it is easier to do the other thing. But then sin is always easier than righteousness. See also under Hell, road to, and Paved.

RUTH PAINTER RANDALL *a native of Virginia, is the wife of J. G. Randall, professor of history at the University of Illinois. Dr. Randall, who is one of the leading authorities on the American Civil War, published a two-volume study, "Lincoln the President," in 1945. The experience of seeing this monumental work come to life provided Mrs. Randall with the material for this amusing essay.*

7. *We Have Had a Book*

We have had a book at our house. We use the expression advisedly. If it is correct to say, "We have had a baby," it is correct to say, "We have had a book." There is an amazing similarity between the two performances.

To take first things first, in the beginning the impending event is not revealed to the public. It is more or less a secret known only to one's close friends and, for obvious reasons, to publisher or physician. As time goes on, the circle of those who know widens. The appearance of long sheets of galley proof around the house discloses the secret as genteelly as infants' garments used to do in the old-fashioned movie. At this stage, for reasons best known to oneself, one begins to decline social engagements and to stay closely at home. The long, grinding ordeal of making an index may well be called a painful labor by those who have experienced it. And the actual day of arrival of the offspring is one never

to be forgotten. It is an event wrapped in tribulation and glory.

With book as with baby, one doesn't know what it looks like until it arrives, and then it is too late to do anything about it. The author who opens his newly minted book to discover a misprint on the first page has all the sensations of a parent whose baby has been born with a birthmark on its face.

This brain child we produced turned out to be twins. This was not the original plan. It usually isn't. It is one of those things announced to you by publisher or doctor, those specialists in obstetric art, after an examination. It is apt to come as a great surprise.

This news came to us when the feminine half of the partnership happened to be in the hospital and very groggy from an operation's anesthetic and sedatives. Her husband told her that a letter had just come from the publishers saying that the book would be in two volumes. Though things in general were rather misty, she was elated, and when the doctor entered, he was greeted with the faint but happy remark, "It's going to be twins." He looked somewhat startled, as such an event would have required considerable revision of his diagnosis.

In one professorial household book and baby arrived about the same time. How strenuous life must have been for this pair! A friend congratulated the professor upon the recent proud event in his family (meaning the baby) and he, thinking, as a man will, of that achievement which had cost him the greater effort, unfortunately replied: "Well, I couldn't have done it without the help of two graduate students."

Books, like babies, resemble their parents. Both events are creative, a launching of a bit of oneself into the world and therefore associated with a sense of fulfillment. Each is a

mutual interest between husband and wife, a loved topic to talk over together and plan for in quiet evenings at home. Both involve a great deal of the good old *ad astra per aspera* feeling. Heaven knows there are "aspera" in either case, but as human parenthood has its deep emotional satisfaction, just so the authorship of a book has its moments of exaltation.

But to the public at large it is just another book or another baby in a world of books and babies. There was never a perfect specimen of either; they all have their faults. One can draw an analogy even here. Little Sue's colic is as undeniable and unexpected an error as the one on page—well, never mind what page it is on—and wee Johnny's tantrum is as embarrassing as the upside-down illustration in volume two. Both book and baby carry the family name, to add distinction to it or otherwise, and that is one of those hazards it is best not to think about when you wake up in the middle of the night.

After it is all over and the finished product has been passed upon by circles outside the family, and there have been praises and criticisms and always a thousand unforeseen complications, problems, and vexations of soul, and you remember the long painful period of effort necessary for its production, you shake your head and say: "Never again. It's too much. We are delighted to have this one; we couldn't picture life without it, but not another. We just *can't* go through all that again."

And then in several years, with book or baby, like as not you have to take it all back.

2

THE WRITER'S PROBLEMS

The Art of Narrative

PHYLLIS BENTLEY *was born in Yorkshire, England, in 1894 and continues to make the West Riding section of that industrial county her home. The daughter of prosperous cloth manufacturers, she was educated at the University of London, and then had a brief career as a cataloguer of books for small libraries. In 1922 she achieved a goal toward which she had been quietly but steadily working since girlhood: she became a successful author with "Environment," a novel semi-autobiographical in theme. More than a dozen novels have followed, most of which have had Yorkshire as their setting. Though they range in time from ancient Rome to the recent past, all are concerned with problems of contemporary importance. Miss Bentley has thought a good deal about the craft of fiction, lecturing on it widely, and writing essays such as the one that follows.*

8. Telling a Story

I can explain my views of the nature of narrative in fiction, its varieties and the place it occupies between the reader and the imaginary world of the story most easily if I translate a psychological fact into a physical metaphor, and say that the reader is divided from the imaginary world of the story by a high wall over which he cannot see. On the top of the wall is perched the writer. He looks down into the world of his imagination and then turns to the reader and tells him what is going on there. The writer of fiction does

not, like the dramatist, pick up bits of his world and set them down on the near side of the wall for actors to animate and his audience to see; the fiction writer narrates; he tells what he sees.

What is it that he sees? The world of the particular story which is at present engaging him; a tremendous three-dimensional pageant of life, not endless, but rolling continuously past the writer's mental eye. A seething flux of phenomena, continually changing, continually transmuting as to some of its items, continually rolling, sweeping, surging, sparkling, and banging by.

Since this world, this moving pageant, is the writer's creation, he is of course omniscient and omnipotent with regard to it.

He is omniscient—the cries of its birds, the thuds of its battles, the thoughts of its people, its clouds, its sunsets, its leaves, its deepest emotions and vastest plains, are all part of its seething flux and he knows them all.

He is omnipotent—he can alter his pageant at will, he can survey any part, in any way, at will. He can look at it or not look at it, as he likes, whenever he likes. He can look at parts of it and not at other parts, if he likes. He can hold it at a distance, he can draw it close. He has its progress, its rolling, completely under his control; he can make it go past him swiftly or slowly, as he likes; he can reverse it backwards, and bring it up again with a jerk, if he chooses. And he does so choose; he delights in handling his pageant variously. Before he begins to tell about his pageant to his readers, he has rolled it backwards and forwards many a score of times, trying to improve its interest and its beauty, trying, too, to decide how he shall handle it on that final occasion when he tells it to his readers.

There are as many ways of rolling a pageant as there are human minds, but in our metaphor the speed of the process

is the operative factor in the type of narrative we receive. Sometimes the writer rolls the pageant by swiftly, so swiftly that details are not discernible. Sometimes the writer rolls it slowly, so that he sees (and tells) each specific action, hears each actual word. Sometimes he halts it altogether for a moment.

Suppose, for example, a part of the writer's imaginary world concerns the journey of his hero Dick and his villain Tom from a village in Central Africa to London. The rolling pageant brings, in its course, Dick and Tom to a long stretch of desert. The desert (this is in Victorian times) is all the same and not very important, and so the writer rolls it swiftly by. He does *not* say: "Dick and Tom raised their right foot and put it down, striding over a yard of sand, and then raised their left foot and put it down, striding over another yard of sand," and go on saying that or something like it until Tom and Dick have marched two hundred miles, and at last reach a palm tree. At the same time he is bound to give an impression of the two hundred miles, for the remoteness, the loneliness, of Dick and Tom is highly important. He therefore holds his pageant at a distance so that he can see its full breadth and rolls it quickly by; he tells us in a few paragraphs about the distant mountains, the burning sun, the sand, the heat of the day, how the feelings of loneliness of Dick and Tom heightened with the journey, and so on. Then when he has created a sufficient impression of the vast stretch of desert lying between the travelers and civilization, he goes on: "The sun was just sinking as Dick and Tom entered the Sazifa oasis."

Something important in his story is going to happen in this oasis, he knows; so he slows up the pageant, and looks very intently at this one portion of it. Now that it is going so slowly, instead of a blur of sound he can hear voices, instead of a white blank he can see the nose and eyes and

cheeks of a face, instead of a pulsating ribbon of cerebration he can perceive the thoughts of Dick and Tom at this single moment. And so, instead of telling us summaries of speech and personality and behavior, he tells us specific words and actions. We read his account of the exact words in which Dick and Tom quarrel, the exact knife-blow with which Tom murders Dick, the exact thoughts, horrified yet rejoicing, with which Tom buries the body.

But the rest of Tom's journey to England isn't important in the least, so the writer simply declines to look at it; he whizzes it by in a flash, so fast that he does not see it at all. He ends his chapter, that is to say; he breaks off his narrative, begins it again only when the liner carrying Tom approaches Southampton. Tom's landing in England isn't very important, so we have a fairly swift narrative of the disembarkation—with one slower view perhaps at the bookstall, where Tom sees an account of Dick's death in a travel magazine. The pageant rolls by fairly swiftly as Tom travels up to London—we must have an impression of farms and green fields, to convey that this is civilization, but do not need to travel the journey mile by mile.

But now Tom arrives at the London terminus, and is met by Ellen, the girl to whom Dick was engaged, the girl whom Tom hopes to marry. This meeting is of the first importance. The writer therefore slows up the pageant and takes a long slow look, and tells us everything that happened in minute detail—Tom's struggles to play a part in look and word, Ellen's candid grief presently becoming shadowed by distrust.

When the writer halts his moving world and tells us what he sees, we term that type of narrative a *description.* When he moves it slowly and tells us single specific actions (including of course those specific actions we call speech and thought), we have learned to term that type of narrative a *scene.* When he rolls his fictitious world by rapidly, so that

he gives us, not each specific moment of many battles but the integrated campaign, not the single impressions of a character but the sum of that character, not the minute-by-minute thought of a man but a summarized account of his gradual conversion to a new course of life—what is the term for that type of narration? Unfortunately there is no generally accepted term. Percy Lubbock, in "The Craft of Fiction," calls these summaries *retrospect* when they refer to the past, but that covers only one of their functions. I myself have adopted the term *summary* to express these condensations, these integrations, but I am not at all satisfied with it. The words *scene* and *summary*, *description* and *summary*, are not proper antitheses. Though indeed—and this is the crux of the argument—the kinds of narrative described above are not antitheses, but distant points in a scale of subtle gradations, stretching from the specific to the integrated.

For all narrative is in fact a summary to some degree. The most specific scene does not narrate the contraction of the muscles, the rush of the impulse along the grey ganglions of the mind, which produces speech or smile. When Virginia Woolf, devotee of the specific, writes in "Jacob's Room": "Thick wax candles stand upright; young men rise in white gowns; while the subservient eagle bears up for inspection the great white book," she is summarizing the complex interactions of systems of internal stresses subjected to external forces, the involved activity of muscular tissue, which makes the candles hold upright in their sconces, the book rest on the eagle, the young men rise. Kipling in his short story "The Ship That Found Herself" specificized (if the word may be forgiven) the movement of a ship; but to state: "a steel girder quivered" is still to summarize the play of conflicting tensions. James Joyce records the swift succession of thought association, but even he does not detail the physical nerve processes of which they are a result. Still, for practical purposes the

place on the scale of the specific of the scene and the summary are sufficiently far apart to justify different names.

The metaphor of the wall and the rolling pageant is a metaphor only, and metaphors though often illuminating are in the last resort untrue, being metaphors and not the thing itself. The story of Dick and Tom and Ellen was a crude invented instance. The truth or falsity of the suggested definition of scene and summary must be tested in the actual narratives of fiction.

The fact is that we know far too little about narrative; our pronouncements are guesses in the dark.

A critical history of the art of narrative, the art of *story-telling*, is urgently necessary. This should study story-telling (whether in verse or prose) from the days of the Greeks and Romans, through the jongleurs, Boccaccio, Malory, Lyly, to the present day. Many interesting points would emerge for investigation. Do certain nations tend more to summary in their fiction, others to scene? Can savages really employ summary at all? If not, why not? Is the summary, the scene, or a mixture of both, the later historical development? When did the convention impose itself of using quotation marks for, and "in-setting" dialogue? What effect has this had upon the art of narrative? What variations do the practices of oral and written telling respectively impose upon the art of narrative? (A story told orally cannot stand many pieces of direct dialogue, for the narrator's attempt to impersonate his characters' voices tends to become both ridiculous and ineffective to the hearer's ear; whereas on the printed page dialogue is highly desirable because it breaks up the monotony of the lines to the reader's eye.) How is characterization affected by summary and scene? Do certain writers through the ages tend to prefer summary, others scene? And why?

These are only a few of the numerous questions which rise

to the mind. They indicate the rich field to be explored by the critic of the art of narrative.

The present observations, admittedly merely introductory, have been gathered together here in the hope that possibly they may stimulate research into this fine, complex, subtle art.

EDITH WHARTON *(1862-1937) will be long remembered for her short stories and novels about the milieu in which she was born and spent most of her life—the fashionable American society which commuted between New York, Newport, Paris, and the Riviera in the two decades before World War I. The daughter of a proud New York family, she married a scion of an equally proud Bostonian and Virginian family. It was her husband's mental illness, students of her career believe, which drove her to seek release through creative writing. In it she recaptured, with gentle humor and a luminous style, the world she knew so well and which was rapidly vanishing as she wrote. Her best-known novels are perhaps "The House of Mirth" (1905), "Ethan Frome" (1911), and "The Age of Innocence" (1920); the last won a Pulitzer Prize.*

9. Permanent Values in Fiction

What constitutes a novel? To the generation which read Dickens and Thackeray, Balzac and Stendhal, the problem hardly presented itself. The answer floated, so to speak, on the surface of the enquiry: a novel is a work of fiction containing a good story about well-drawn characters.

To a generation nurtured on James Joyce and Virginia Woolf, such a definition seems not only pitifully simple, but far from comprehensive. The real preoccupations of some modern novelists seem so unrelated to the form they have

chosen that one is almost driven to wonder if practical interests have not tempted them to expand the scope of the novel.

Supposing a brilliant essayist, a literary critic, or a historian, wishes to get a wide hearing for his ideas, and a remunerative market for his prose; if he asks himself in what form his work will reach the largest public, the obvious answer is: in the form of fiction. This was discovered long ago by the pleaders of special causes—Harriet Beecher Stowe, Charles Reade, Mrs. Gaskell, for example—who produced (often with immensely remunerative results) that unhappy hybrid, the novel with a purpose. But they all respected the then accepted view of the novel, as being a vehicle for the telling of a story, and simply told their stories in terms of the moral they wanted to enforce, instead of letting their characters follow unhindered the devious ways of experience.

The modern writer with a purpose barely troubles to manufacture mouthpieces for his ideas or views. The characters in modern fiction are often (as, for instance, in the novels of D. H. Lawrence) no more differentiated than a set of megaphones, through all of which the same voice interminably reiterates the same ideas.

It is true that there is still an ineradicable undergrowth of writers instinctively convinced that the novelist's job is to tell a tale and to mirror human nature; and whenever they have the ability to accomplish one or both of these difficult feats, the general public seizes on their books with avidity. But for the present the trend of serious criticism turns more and more from this conception of the novel, whatever talent may go to its making.

The novel in its most serious form is tending to become a sort of anthology of the author's ideas; and to those who object that a given book, labeled a novel by its author, is really only a literary hold-all, the author, and most of the

critics, condescendingly reply that the book in question is, on the contrary, a new form of novel—an answer which sounds final, but obviously begs the question. The attempt to define the modern novel was anticipated, a generation ago, by the witty Mrs. Bell of Boston. A bucolic friend presented Mrs. Bell with a suckling pig so remarkably pink and pleasing that, instead of eating it, she kept it as a household pet as long as it was small enough for the part. But at length for all its endearing qualities, it outgrew the drawing-room; and on being questioned as to its subsequent fate, Mrs. Bell sadly said: "Oh, we just keep it to put things in."

I do not for a moment assume that essayists and historians are turning themselves into novelists from motives mainly commercial, or at least consciously so. I wish they were; for I believe the real cause to be a much more harmful one—the belief that new "forms" are recurringly necessary in all the arts. It is less dangerous for an artist to sacrifice his artistic instincts to the pursuit of money or popularity than to immolate them to a theory; and I know no theory more contrary to the free action of genius than the persuasion that a given formula—alphabet, language, or any generally accredited form of expression, is worn out because too many people have used it. When I hear this asserted by critics, and see it tremblingly accepted by would-be creators, I am reminded of a distressed millionairess who once said to me: "My husband and I want to build a country house, but we don't know what style to choose, for one of my brothers-in-law has already used the Ionic order, and the other the Corinthian—and the Doric is really too simple!"

Since the world began, and man pictured his first stories on the walls of prehistoric caves, forms have been unceasingly and irresistibly modified by having new life poured into them; for what my distraught millionairess did not know, but what critics of any of the arts should surely remember,

is the incessant renovation of old types by new creative action. There is no fear of monotony while the creative springs perpetually bubble up in new intelligences; and I doubt if, for instance, it would have occurred to any really great creative writer that the old rules of syntax were too narrow for his genius, unless he had been told so by the non-creative.

One must turn to the past to learn what the permanent values are in the field of fiction; for it is not always easy to ascertain, if one tries to discover them in one's contemporaries. There is a law of mental optics which makes it difficult, in all the arts, to separate surface novelty from real originality; but few are conscious of this optical incapacity, and some (it must be remembered) are not afflicted by it. In spite of the *Quarterly*, a handful of Keats' contemporaries knew what he had given them; and in every generation there has been an eye adjusted to focus the eternal at short range.

In general, however, when the range is too close, the object contemplated tends to become either blurred or monstrously enlarged; and it is only necessary to study that master of all the critics, Sainte-Beuve, to find countless instances of the unreliability of contemporary "close-ups." Perhaps only one great creative artist can discern the supreme qualities of another; as Napoleon did when he saw Goethe, as Balzac did when he read Stendhal.

Taking this difficulty into account, I am inclined to think that the best way of estimating contemporary writers is by extracting from the whole body of fiction some evidence of what its lasting qualities are; to find out what "keeps" and what does not. Though in all the arts it is admitted that contemporary judgments are often temporary, we agree to assume that the verdict of time is final. And that verdict, where the writing of fiction is concerned, seems to say that two qualities alone survive the test. One, and the principal, is the creating of characters which so possess us with the sense

of their reality that we talk of Anna Karenina, Becky Sharp, Père Goriot, and Tess, as of real people whom we have known and lived with; and the other is the art of relating these characters to whatever general law of human experience made the novelist choose to tell their tale rather than another.

The average reader is told every morning, by wireless and book-jacket, by news-item and picture-paper, who is in the day's spotlight, and must be admired (and if possible read) before the illumination shifts; and every passing fad and experiment in their favorite field of letters is pressed on them with bewildering rapidity. All this tends to make popular judgments more unreliable than ever; but it is the more instructive to note that when a Babbitt struts on the stage the thin shadows take flight before his sturdy flesh-and-blood, and a deep laugh of appreciation encircles the world.

Mr. Lewis is not the only creator of live people among modern novelists, but I choose him as a symbol because the line he follows—while it is in some danger of becoming a rut—seems to me to be the true one. In his quest of material he has conformed to Goethe's counsel, and plunged his hand into the thick of average human nature; and I believe the greatest error of the younger novelists, of whatever school, has been to imagine that abnormal or highly specialized characters offer a richer field than the normal and current varieties. Emily Brontë was a woman of genius; but if she had lived longer, and attained to a closer contact with reality, she might have made, out of the daily stuff of life at Haworth Parsonage, a greater and more deeply moving book than by picturing a houseful of madmen. Dostoievsky, in "The Idiot," also essayed the study of abnormal people; but he blent them with the normal, as life itself does—and thus, incidentally, showed that their chief interest, for the reader, lies not in their own case, but in its tragic and destructive

reactions on the normal. And readers who, in spite of their admiration for "Wuthering Heights," sometimes find it difficult to disentangle Heathcliff from Earnshaw, and the two Catherines from one another, will not easily forget the living presence of Prince Myshkin, and his strange vigil with the murderer beside the dead body of Nastasia.

The general reading public, suggestible though it is, and anxious to follow the hints given by the selective minority, is yet irresistibly drawn to any book based on genuine observation of character, and embodied in consecutive and significant narrative. Sinclair Lewis's success is probably due far more to the fact that he has drawn people with recognizable faces, and told their stories with a vigorous simplicity, than because of any general perception of his rare gift of tragic irony. A long course of cinema obviousnesses and of tabloid culture has rendered the majority of readers insensible to allusiveness and to irony, but they still rouse themselves when they see "a likeness" to flesh-and-blood in the people they are asked to read about; and I believe this instinct is a sound one, and that such books as Sinclair Lewis's and Theodore Dreiser's have more of the lasting stuff of good fiction in them than dozens of works dressed up in a passing notoriety.

WILLIAM SAROYAN *was born in 1908 at Fresno, California, of Armenian parents. He left school early and pursued a variety of callings, including those of telegraph messenger, farm laborer, and newspaper reporter. When he was thirteen he began writing stories; ultimately some of them—of which "The Daring Young Man on the Flying Trapeze" is the most notable—brought him recognition from Edward J. O'Brien,* Story, *and* The Overland Monthly. *He tried his hand at plays, too, and his "The Time of Your Life" won the Pulitzer Prize in 1940. Since wartime service in the Air Force, Mr. Saroyan has been living in San Francisco and writing—although not at the feverish pace that marked his early years. The definition of a story that he gives here is as unorthodox as most of his writing.*

10. What Is a Story?

What, if anything, is a story? Well, frankly, I do not exactly know, and believe no one exactly knows, and if anyone *does* exactly know, I believe this *knowing* isn't so terrifically important, and if it is important at all, I do not believe it is important enough to stand in the way of the growth of art, which is inevitably the growth of living, and if I myself am interested in anything at all, I am interested in growth, in keeping in motion, in expanding, in not standing still, however artfully. To be petrified, I suppose, is to be perfect after

a fashion, but I would rather be wholly alive, in motion, and imperfect. I would certainly prefer to stop writing altogether than to be turned into a pillar of salt. The man who journeys should not turn back to look upon the road he has traveled.

Short, or short short, story or novel, are necessary terms, I suppose, but not too necessary not to be ignored, if need be, and I think need be. Art is not wholly duration, although duration is part of art. What it is mostly is integration, a making of wholeness. An egg is whole, and is an egg no less because it is small or large, ostrich or robin, white or spotted. The wholeness of a billiard ball is unlike the wholeness of an egg in that it cannot be eaten or hatched into a bird. The wholeness of a billiard ball is form alone: the shape round, the color white, the texture smooth, the density even and sustained: form alone. The egg is form *and* substance. That is, living substance, mutability, substance growing.

So, if a creation of art is not large, it is no less a creation of art, and even if it is not a story, short or long, it is still a creation of art. I don't care *what* my stuff is called, just so I go on creating it. I don't even care if it is printed and read or not, just so I go on creating it, which is the beginning and the end of my part of the bargain. In a country where the art of ballyhoo is highly developed it is inevitable that even an important writer shall be so widely ballyhooed as to seem to be only another unimportant writer, and this is so because publication of a book, however important, is primarily a business risk, involving money, and the need to sell a book, even if it is great, makes ballyhoo essential, and too much ballyhoo rather amusingly upsets the balance of critics normally sound, and the result is that a great writer is interpreted in terms of the amount of ballyhoo surrounding him, which is critically idiotic, and has absolutely nothing to do with the works of the writer, and less to do with the writer himself. A thing is what it is, especially a created thing. An

uncreated thing, an imitated thing, is not even what it is supposed to be, and is therefore largely nothing. It is not a question of whether or not a creation is a story, but a question of whether or not it *is* at all, and if it *is*, but is seemingly not a story, it *is* nevertheless, and that's all there is to it.

The Novel

ELLEN GLASGOW *(1874-1945) lived all her life in Richmond, Virginia; and all her novels portrayed, in an ironic fashion, the relations of Southern women with Southern men. Miss Glasgow acquired most of her education in her father's extensive library. Although she began writing while quite young, her first novel, "The Descendants," was not published until she was twenty-five. More than a dozen others followed, and one—"In This Our Life"—was awarded the Pulitzer Prize in 1942. In this essay, which she described as a "highly personal statement," Miss Glasgow tells of her methods as a writer.*

11. One Way To Write Novels

I began being a novelist as naturally as I began talking or walking, so early that I cannot remember when the impulse first seized me. Far back in my childhood, before I had learned the letters of the alphabet, a character named Little Willie wandered into the country of my mind, just as every other major character in my novels has strolled across my mental horizon when I was not expecting him, when I was not even thinking of the novel in which he would finally take his place. From what or where he had sprung, why he was named Little Willie, or why I should have selected a hero instead of a heroine—all this is still as much of a mystery to me as it was in my childhood. But there he

was, and there he remained, alive and active, threading his own adventures, from the time I was three until I was eight or nine, and discovered Hans Andersen and Grimm's Fairy Tales. Every night, as I was undressed and put to bed by my colored Mammy, the romance of Little Willie would begin again exactly where it had broken off the evening before. In winter I was undressed in the firelight on the hearth-rug; but in summer we moved over to an open window that looked out on the sunset and presently the first stars in the long green twilight. For years Little Willie lasted, never growing older, always pursuing his own narrative and weaving his situations out of his own character. I can still see him, small, wiry, with lank brown hair like a thatch, and eyes that seemed to say, "I know a secret! I know a secret!" Hans Andersen and the brothers Grimm were his chosen companions. He lingered on, though somewhat sadly, after I had discovered the Waverley Novels; but when I was twelve years old and entered the world of Dickens, he vanished forever.

In those earliest formative years Little Willie outlined, however vaguely, a general pattern of work. He showed me that a novelist must write, not by taking thought alone, but with every cell of his being, that nothing can occur to him that may not sooner or later find its way into his craft. Whatever happened to me or to Mammy Lizzie happened also, strangely transfigured, to Little Willie. I learned, too, and never forgot, that ideas would not come to me if I went out to hunt for them. They would fly when I pursued; but if I stopped and sank down into a kind of watchful reverie, they would flock back again like friendly pigeons. All I had to do, before the novel had formed, was to leave the creative faculty (or subconscious mind) free to work its own way without urging and without effort. When Dorinda in "Barren Ground" first appeared to me, I pushed her back into some glimmering obscurity, where she remained, buried but alive,

for a decade, and emerged from the yeasty medium with hard round limbs and the bloom of health in her cheeks. Thus I have never wanted for subjects; but on several occasions when, because of illness or from external compulsion, I have tried to invent a theme or a character, invariably the effort has resulted in failure. These are the unnatural children of my brain that I should wish, were it possible, to disinherit.

It is not easy to tell how much of this dependence upon intuition may be attributed to the lack of harmony between my inner life and my early environment. A thoughtful and imaginative child, haunted by that strange sense of exile which visits the subjective mind when it is unhappily placed (and it is always, apparently, unhappily placed or it would not be subjective), I grew up in a charming society, where ideas were accepted as naturally as the universe or the weather, and cards for the old, dancing for the young, and conversation flavored with personalities for the middle-aged, were the only arts practised. Several members of my family, it is true, possessed brilliant minds and were widely and deeply read; but all despised what they called "local talent," and my early work was written in secret to escape ridicule, alert, pointed, and not the less destructive because it was playful. There is more truth than wit in the gibe that every Southern novelist must first make his reputation in the North. Perhaps this is why so many Southern novelists write of the South as if it were a fabulous country. When a bound copy of my first book reached me, I hid it under my pillow while a cousin, who had run in before breakfast, prattled beside my bed of the young men who had quarreled over the privilege of taking her to the Easter German, as the Cotillion was called. Had I entered the world by way of Oxford, or even by way of Bloomsbury, I might now be able to speak or write of my books without a feeling of outraged reserve. And yet, in the very act of writing these words, my literary conscience,

a nuisance to any writer, inquires if ideas were really free at Oxford, or even in Bloomsbury, at the end of the century, and if all the enfranchised spirits who babble of prohibited subjects nowadays are either wiser or better than the happy hypocrites of the nineties.

From this dubious prelude it might be inferred that I consider the craft of fiction merely another form of mental inertia. On the contrary, I agree with those writers who have found actual writing to be the hardest work in the world. What I am concerned with at the moment, however, is the beginning of a novel alone, not the endless drudgery that wrung from Stevenson the complaint, "The practice of letters is miserably harassing to the mind; and after an hour or two's work, all the more human portion of an author is extinct; he will bully, backbite, and speak daggers." For being a true novelist, even if one's work is not worth the price of a cherry to public or publisher, takes all that one has to give and still something more. Yet the matter is not one of choice but of fatality. Like the enjoyment of music, or a love for El Greco, or a pleasure in gardening, or the taste for pomegranates, or a preference for Santayana's prose, the bent of nature is either there or it is not there.

For my own part, and it appears, however far I stray, that I must still return to "the highly personal statement," the only method I have deliberately cultivated has been a system of constant renewal. If novels should be, as Sir Leslie Stephen has said, "transfigured experience," then I have endeavored, whenever it was possible, to deepen experience and to heighten what I prefer to call illumination, to increase my understanding of that truth of life which has never become completely reconciled with the truth of fiction. I do not mean by this that life should necessarily be eventful or filled with variable activities. Profound emotion does not inevitably bear "the pageant of a bleeding heart." Several of the most

thrilling lives in all literature were lived amid the unconquerable desolation of the Yorkshire moors. Yet it is doubtful if either the exposed heart of Byron or the brazen trumpet of D. H. Lawrence contained such burning realities as were hidden beneath the quiet fortitude of Emily Brontë.

Because of some natural inability to observe and record instead of create, I have never used an actual scene until the impression it left had sifted down into imagined surroundings. A theme becomes real to me only after it is clothed in living values; but these values must be drawn directly from the imagination and indirectly, if at all, from experience. Invariably the characters appear first, and slowly and gradually build up their own world and spin the situation and atmosphere out of themselves. Strangely enough, the horizon of this real or visionary world is limited by the impressions or recollections of my early childhood. If I were to walk out into the country and pick a scene for a book, it would remain as flat and lifeless as cardboard; but the places I loved or hated between the ages of three and thirteen compose an inexhaustible landscape of memory. Occasionally, it is true, I have returned to a scene to verify details, though for freshness and force I have trusted implicitly to the vision within. And just as my scene is built up from fragments of the past, whether that past existed in fact or in a dream, so the human figures, though not one of them has been copied from my acquaintances, will startle me by displaying a familiar trait or gesture, and I will recognize with a shock some special blending of characteristics.

Frequently, these impressions have been buried so long and so deep that I have entirely forgotten them until they float upward to the surface of thought. Yet they are not dead but living, and recover warmth and animation after the creative faculty has revived them. In the same way, half-obliterated images, events, or episodes, observed in moments of intense

experience, will flash back into a scene or a figure; and this is equally true of the most trivial detail my memory has registered. For example, in one of the tragic hours of my youth I looked out of a window and saw two sparrows quarrelling in the rain on a roof. Twenty years or more afterwards, a character in one of my novels looks out of a window in a moment of heartbreak and sees two sparrows quarrelling in the rain. And, immediately, light streamed back, as if it were cast by the rays of a lantern, into the unlit recesses of memory, and I felt the old grief in my heart and saw the rain fall on the roof and the two sparrows quarrelling.

Because everything that one has seen or heard or thought or felt leaves a deposit that never filters entirely through the essence of mind, I believe that a novelist should be perpetually engaged in this effort to refresh and replenish his source. I am confident, moreover, that nothing I have learned either from life or from literature has been wasted. Whatever I have thought or felt deeply has stayed with me, if only in fragments or in a distillation of memory. But the untiring critic within has winnowed, reassorted, and disposed the material I needed.

Not until the unconscious worker has withdrawn from the task, or taken a brief holiday, and the characters have woven their own background and circumstances, does the actual drudgery of moulding the mass-substance begin. Even now, after the groundwork is completed and the subject assembled, I still give time and thought (brooding is the more accurate term) to the construction. I try not to hasten the process and leave the invisible agent to flash directions or warnings. The book must have a form. This is essential. It may be shaped like a millstone or an hourglass or an Indian tomahawk or a lace fan—but a shape it must have. Usually a novel assumes its own figure when it enters the world, and the underlying idea moulds the plastic material to its own structure. More

deliberately, the point of view is considered and selected, though this may, and often does, proceed naturally from the unities of time and place, or from one completely dominant figure. In "Barren Ground," a long novel, I felt from the moment Dorinda entered the book that there could be but one point of view. From the first page to the last, no scene or episode or human figure appears outside her field of vision or imagination.

In "The Sheltered Life," where I knew intuitively that the angle of vision must create the form, I employed two points of view alone, though they were separated by the whole range of experience. Age and youth look on the same scene, the same persons, the same events and occasions, the same tragedy in the end. Between these conflicting points of view the story flows on, like a stream in a narrow valley. Nothing happens that is not seen, on one side, through the steady gaze of the old man, seeing life as it is, and, on the other side, by the troubled eyes of the young girl, seeing life as she would wish it to be. Purposely, I have tried here to interpret reality through the dissimilar mediums of thought and emotion. I have been careful to allow no other aspects to impinge on the contrasting visions which create between them the organic whole of the book. This convention, which appears uncertain, when one thinks of it, becomes natural and even involuntary when the work grows, develops, pushes out with its own energy, and finds its own tempo.

While I am at work on a book I remain, or try to remain, in a state of immersion. The first draft of a novel, if it is long, will take two years, and still another year is required for the final writing. All this time the imaginary setting becomes the native country of my mind, and the characters are seldom out of my thoughts. I live with them day and night; they are more real to me than acquaintances in the flesh. In our nursery copy of "Gulliver's Travels" there was

a picture which seems, when I recall it now, to illustrate my predicaments in the final draft of a novel. Gulliver lies bound in threads while the Lilliputians swarm over him and hamper his struggles. So words swarm over me and hamper my efforts to seize the right one among them, to find the right rhythm, the right tone, the right accent. But here again intuition, or perhaps only a flare of organized memory, will come to my aid. Often, when I have searched for hours for some special word or phrase and given up in despair, I have awaked with a start in the night because the hunted word or phrase had darted into my mind while I was asleep.

Nevertheless, it is the act of scrupulous revision (the endless pruning and trimming for the sake of a sound and flexible prose style) that provides the writer's best solace even while it makes drudgery. Every literary craftsman who respects his work has, I dare say, this same feeling, and remains restless and wandering in mind until he has entered the right climate in the beginning and tracked down the right word at the end. Although my characters may develop traits or actions I had not anticipated, the scenes may shift and alter in perspective, and new episodes may spring out on the way, still the end shines always as the solitary fixed star above the flux of creation. I have never written the first word of the first sentence until I knew what the last word of the last sentence would be. Sometimes I may rewrite the beginning many times, as I did in "They Stooped to Folly," and sometimes (though this has actually occurred but once) a shorter book like "The Romantic Comedians," completely realized before pen was put to paper, may bubble over of itself with a kind of effortless joy. Yet in the difficult first chapter of "They Stooped to Folly" I could still look ahead, over a procession of characters that had slipped from my control, to the subdued scene at the end, while the concluding para-

graph of "The Romantic Comedians" placed the tone of the entire book and accented the rhythm.

The final words to be said of any activity will always be, I suppose, was it worth what it cost? Well, the writing of fiction is worth, I imagine, exactly what digging a ditch or charting the heavens may be worth to the worker, and that is not a penny more or less than the release of mind that it brings. Although I may not speak as an authority, at least I can speak from long perseverance. I became a novelist before I was old enough to resist, and I remained a novelist because no other enterprise in life has afforded me the same interest or provided me with equal contentment. It is true that I have written only for the biased judgment within; but this inner critic has held an unattainable standard, and has infused a certain zest of adventure into what may appear on the surface to be merely another humdrum way of earning a livelihood. Still, to a beginner who is young and cherishes an ambition to be celebrated, I should recommend the short cut (or royal road) through the radio and Hollywood; and certainly more than one creative writer in search of swift economic security would do well to buy a new broom and to set out for the next crossing. But, incredible as it may appear in this practical decade, there are novelists so wanting in a sense of the best proletarian values that they place artistic integrity above the voice on the air, the flash on the screen, and the dividends in the bank. There are others who possess an unreasoning faith in their own work; and there are yet others endowed with a comic spirit so robust, or so lively, that it can find diversion anywhere, even in our national exaltation of the inferior. To this happy company of neglected novelists, the ironic art of fiction will reveal its own special delights, and may even, as the years pass, yield its own sufficient, if imponderable, rewards.

In looking back through a long vista, I can see that what I have called the method of constant renewal may be reduced to three ruling principles. Obedience to this self-imposed discipline has enabled me to write novels for more than thirty years, and yet to feel that the substance from which I draw material and energy is as fresh today as it was in my first youthful failure. As time moves on, I still see life in beginnings, moods in conflict, and change as the only permanent law. But the value of these qualities (which may be self-deluding, and are derived, in fact, more from temperament than from technique) has been mellowed by long saturation with experience—by that essence of reality which one distils from life only after it has been lived.

Among the many curious superstitions of the age of science there is the prevailing belief that immaturity alone is enough. Pompous illiteracy, escaped from some Freudian cage, is in the saddle, and the voice of the amateur is the voice of authority. When we turn to the field of prose fiction, we find that it is filled with literary skyrockets sputtering out in the fog. But the trouble with skyrockets has always been that they do not stay up in the air. One has only to glance back over the post-war years to discover that the roads of the jazz age are matted thick with fireworks that went off too soon. To the poet, it is true, especially if he can arrange with destiny to die young, the glow of adolescence may impart an unfading magic. But the novel (which must be conceived with a subdued rapture, or with none at all, or even with the unpoetic virtues of industry and patience) requires more substantial ingredients than a little ignorance of life and a great yearning to tell everything one has never known. When I remember Defoe, the father of us all, I am persuaded that the novelist who has harvested well the years, and laid by a rich store of experience, will find his latter period the ripening time of his career.

Transposed into an impersonal method, the three rules of which I have spoken may be so arranged:

1. Always wait between books for the springs to fill up and flow over.

2. Always preserve within a wild sanctuary, an inaccessible valley of reveries.

3. Always, and as far as it is possible, endeavor to touch life on every side; but keep the central vision of the mind, the inmost light, untouched and untouchable.

In my modest way, these rules have helped me, not only to pursue the one calling for which I was designed alike by character and inclination, but even to enjoy the prolonged study of a world that, as the sardonic insight of Henry Adams perceived, no "sensitive and timid natures could regard without a shudder."

PEARL BUCK *(born 1892) is the only American woman to win the Nobel Prize for literature. Although she was born in Hillsboro, West Virginia, her missionary parents took her to China when she was small enough to be carried in a market basket. She returned to the United States to attend Randolph-Macon Woman's College, married an "agricultural missionary" and went back to China. "The Good Earth," her second book, attracted wide attention when it was published in 1931, and was awarded the Pulitzer Prize. Mrs. Buck has lived in the United States since 1934 and, with her second husband, Richard J. Walsh, now directs the affairs of the John Day Co., book publishers. Though a few of her numerous novels, biographies, and children's books have dealt with the American scene, critics have been most enthusiastic about her work when it dealt with China. Mrs. Buck gives an inkling of why that is so in her advice to unborn novelists.*

12. Advice to Unborn Novelists

The first piece of advice I shall give a novelist is to take the greatest care about where he is born. Other people may be born anywhere and it makes very little difference to anybody. But to a novelist it matters a great deal, because all his experience in life from his very earliest years is his material from which he must draw all his life long, and to start in the wrong country is most unfortunate for him, and handicaps him irreparably. I take myself as an example. I

was born in America, but at the age of three months I was taken across the Pacific in a market basket.

I have been continually hampered by that fact. For it is the greatest disadvantage to a novelist to spend his pre-writing years outside of his own country. I shall never forget how handicapped I was when I first began to send out small tentative essays and stories. Back they came to me, always with the same regret—"we are not interested in anything about China." The manuscript of my little preliminary book I sent first myself to a publisher, only to have it come flying back—"regret the American public is not interested in anything on China." Here was I, compelled by my very nature to write stories, and yet the English speaking people, *my* people, did not want the only thing I knew to write about! I sent the little manuscript to an agent, expecting nothing, and I am sure that out of all the many publishers to whom he sent it not one who refused it did not include as at least one of his chief reasons against it that it dealt with Chinese subjects. When by some miracle it found a publisher, it was because he saw through the Chinese material and sensed the possibility that the writer was primarily interested not in the Chinese people, but in people and writing about them.

My books have been called foreign not only in their material, but in their very speech. People say they are written in a style like that of the Bible. The style is not biblical, it is Chinese. For of course when I wrote in China of Chinese things about Chinese, I used the Chinese tongue.

This brings me to another piece of advice. Never, small unborn novelist, learn first to speak in a language which is not your own. For I made that great mistake. After outgrowing the market basket, I naturally learned to talk and I talked Chinese. The first curls of my tongue and lips were made about Chinese vowels and consonants, and my first sentences were in Chinese idioms. The consequence is that

when I am writing about Chinese people the story spins itself in my mind entirely in Chinese, and I literally translate it as I go. The phrases for which I am praised or blamed are idiomatic Chinese phrases, and I do not even know many times whether they are good English. I know that so long as I live I shall have difficulty with prepositions, because the Chinese language has very few, and English is simply prickly with them.

The point I am trying to make to the unborn novelist is, if he is to lead a comfortable life, that he belongs somewhere, and that he write about his own. Yet I begin to have premonitions that there is no real comfort anywhere for the novelist. I call to mind now two reviews I have read in the last few days of a recent book, unfortunately mine, in which the endeavor was made to portray very briefly through the eyes of a reticent Chinese student four or five Americans. I thought them interesting and likable people—a landlady, very good-natured although overweight as many landladies seem to be the world over, a dreaming, sensitive, religious-minded professor and his kindly Christian wife, and their daughter, a keen, intelligent, rather moody young librarian in a university. But the reviewer says with great indignation, "At least the author might have chosen the best types to represent out of her own country." It is the old familiar accusation, "Why don't you use your writing for the glory of Jesus Christ, for the glory of China, for the glory of America"—always some glory or other! The one inexorable answer of any novelist who at least desires above all else to be a true artist as far as he is able, is that he will not use any little ability he has for the glory of any religion or any cause or any country or any people or anything. He will let his writing flower as it will, and his only cause be humanity, whatever its color or creed, whether it be good or evil. He will portray human beings only as he sees them. His sight

may be partial or it may be warped or it may be defective in many ways, because he also is no more than human, but if he be artist he will still write only what he really sees and knows, as he sees it. He cannot follow any other sight or hearsay, nor will he tolerate the guidance of a cause, however Christian, righteous, moral or communist it may be.

It may be then that all my advice to the unborn novelist is worthless. The truth is that he will never quite belong in the world, however carefully he chooses his native land. For it is not true that he is only human—he is always a little fey—a little just off the human. He will live much of his life bemused by his companions, his actual flesh and blood companions who are always more to him than mere flesh and blood, and besides them, he will have all the people whom he shapes from them, his book people, his real people. And because he lives in two worlds and never quite in either, is never quite upon this planet, and yet can never get wholly away from it, he will never know how to answer the questions people will surely ask him about his books—strange, definite, hard questions.

They will ask him, "Do you take your characters from life?" How can he answer? He knows what they mean. They mean, "Did you lift such and such a character from an actual setting? Is it Mrs. This, or is it Dr. That?" Well, of course, it is not either. It is not an actual person, for how could an actual person fit into the covers of a book? The book is not a continent, not a definite geographical measure, it cannot contain so huge a thing as an actual full-size person. Any person has to be scaled by eliminations to fit the book world. Of course, it is true that many of his characters do come from ideas given him by factual people, slight pictures he sees as he passes. The way a woman leans her head upon her hand habitually may suggest to him some other woman of his own mind, and he may clothe that dream woman with

the same eyes and hair, and bestow upon her certain gestures and ways that are that factual woman's also. But he never, I think, exactly reproduces any character or any situation. His own imagination, his own emotions, the peculiar need of the situation in his book, shape and remold and inform all he takes from the actual world about him. It is true that even his imagined people, however, must have their start in actual life, because the novelist cannot imagine life quite without actuality as one cannot imagine music who has never heard a note of music.

What is real, anyway? Not what happens outside a person. I have spent my life in the midst of the most foolishly extraordinary external circumstances. I have seen the crude happenings of nature in famine and flood, and I have seen the crude happenings of men in wars and conflicts and oppressions. I have made long journeys in sedan chairs and in ox-carts and on horseback and in airplanes. But there is nothing intrinsically interesting in such things except as they happen to some person. It is only what happens inside a person that is really drama and really exciting. It brings one back to the old question of whether there can be a noise if there is no one to hear it. Does anything happen if it does not happen to someone? The novelist at least must believe that it does not.

And this little novelist must be born with one thing more. He must have a stout heart. He cannot be afraid of anyone. He cannot care for what anyone thinks. He must care for everyone, because every human being has for him especial interest. A novelist above all men must like people, and yet he must not let any human being shape his course or direct his art. He must let no approbation deceive him, nor any criticism dishearten him. Above all, he must seek to please no one. Not even the critics? Not even the critics!

For let no simple minded, newly born novelist think that

with the publishing of his book his trouble is ended. There is that horrible day of publication, which is really for him a day of judgment, when the critics in the newspapers sharpen their carving knives and leap upon their prey, determined to send him to heaven or to hell. I do not know how to advise this young novelist, how to prepare him against that dreadful day.

For it was a matter of some astonishment to me that even at first I did not mind them as much, apparently, as first novelists usually do. That very first day when a kind friend came in with a crumpled newspaper in her hand and said with a preparatory, consolatory air, "Now you must not think they all feel as this one does—remember he is very young—and his reviews are very much based on his personal prejudices," and all those things which kind friends do say to a novelist when a critic has given the beloved book a bad review. Well, I braced myself, and read the review, and it was very unfavorable. But somehow, I did not mind. It seemed as though I had heard it all before—all the accusations and denunciations, all the reiterating of a violent personal creed, to which I had no objection, but with which I did not agree—for myself.

Well, the point of it is that I must advise the little unborn novelist when his first book is published and his second and his third even to the end, that he must not allow himself to be cast down by critics patterned into creeds of varying political religions, any more than he must allow himself to be weakened by the fulsome praise of critics too loose and too little discerning, so that by their overpraise he relaxes his own high standard, which is to know what he wants to do, and do it to the height of his ability, and let the result stand.

The truth is, of course, that amazingly few literary critics are able to obey that simple basic rule of all criticism, to ask what does this novelist want to do, and has he done it? The

critic has no right to say, "I don't like this book because I don't agree with the author's point of view or his choice of people—in other words, I don't like his theology because it is not mine. I believe in immersion and he doesn't, and he's wrong."

It may very well be that the little novelist decides after all this that it is better not to be born a novelist at all, and he had better be born something else. My final advice to him, then, is that if he can bear to be born something else, he had better be. But if, like some of his fellows, he had rather never live than not be a novelist and a teller of tales, then let him come with the stoutest joy, for the heartiest life in the world awaits him. He will suffer ten times as much as anyone else, because he will be born cruelly sensitive to every impact upon him, to the touch of every person, of everything, of every happening. He will suffer a hundred times to another's once, because he suffers not only through the medium of his own one life, but through the lives of every person he creates. He will see ugliness beyond his endurance, because he cannot help seeing everything. To feel—to see—are his nature, even as it is his nature to create. But he will see beauty, too, as none other can see it. He will feel joy as none other can feel it, love will be to him a radiance greater than the sun, and appreciation will find him somehow if he does his work to his honest best and it will be sweeter than honey to him. If his every sense is heightened to an agony of perception, it is justly heightened, and joy is acute, too. And his will be that acutest joy of all, that rare, strange, secret, inexplicable ecstasy of joy, the joy of a god who one day took earth into his hand and created a man and a woman, and saw them live.

THOMAS WOLFE *(1900-1938) has been hailed as the true inheritor of the tradition of Walt Whitman and has been decried as a perpetrator of bombastic, delirious prose; but it is clear that he is destined for a prominent and permanent niche in American literature. The son of a stonecutter and a boardinghouse-keeper, Wolfe grew up in Asheville, North Carolina, received degrees from the University of North Carolina and Harvard, and taught English briefly at New York University. In the five gargantuan novels he wrote while living in New York City and in Europe, he told the story of his own life in vivid and unforgettable detail. While still in his prime, he died in a Baltimore hospital of complications following an operation. In "The Story of a Novel" Wolfe described the elation he felt when his first novel, "Look Homeward, Angel" (1932), was published, and told how he wrote "Of Time and the River" (1935). Originally serialized in the* Saturday Review *in 1935, "The Story of a Novel" is now available as a book; the passage that follows represents approximately one-third of the entire work.*

13. The Story of a Novel

Now I was faced with another fundamental problem which every young writer must meet squarely if he is to continue. How is a man to get his writing done? How long should he work at writing? and how often? What kind of method, if any, must he find in following his work? I sud-

denly found myself face to face with the grim necessity of constant, daily work. And as simple as this discovery may seem to everyone, I was not prepared for it. A young writer without a public does not feel the sense of necessity, the pressure of time, as does a writer who has been published and who must now begin to think of time schedules, publishing seasons, the completion of his next book. I realized suddenly with a sense of definite shock that I had let six months go by since the publication of my first book and that, save for a great many notes and fragments, I had done nothing. Meanwhile, the book ["Look Homeward, Angel"] continued to sell slowly but steadily, and in February 1930, about five months after its publication, I found it possible to resign from the faculty of New York University and devote my full time to the preparation of a second book. That spring I was also fortunate enough to be awarded the Guggenheim Fellowship which would enable me to live and work abroad for a year. And accordingly, at the beginning of May, I went abroad again.

I was in Paris for a couple of months, until the middle of July, and although I now compelled myself to work for four or five hours a day, my effort at composition was still confused and broken, and there was nothing yet that had the structural form and unity of a book. The life of the great city fascinated me as it had always done, but also aroused all the old feelings of naked homelessness, rootlessness, and loneliness which I have always felt there. During that summer in Paris, I think I felt this great homesickness more than ever before, and I really believe that from this emotion, this constant and almost intolerable effort of memory and desire, the material and the structure of the books I now began to write were derived.

The quality of my memory is characterized, I believe, in a more than ordinary degree by the intensity of its sense

impressions, its power to evoke and bring back the odors, sounds, colors, shapes, and feel of things with concrete vividness. Now my memory was at work night and day, in a way that I could at first neither check nor control and that swarmed unbidden in a stream of blazing pageantry across my mind, with the million forms and substances of the life that I had left, which was my own, America. I would be sitting, for example, on the terrace of a café watching the flash and play of life before me on the Avenue de l'Opéra and suddenly I would remember the iron railing that goes along the boardwalk at Atlantic City. I could see it instantly just the way it was, the heavy iron pipes; its raw, galvanized look; the way the joints were fitted together. It was all so vivid and concrete that I could feel my hand upon it and know the exact dimensions, its size and weight and shape. And suddenly I would realize that I had never seen any railing that looked like this in Europe. And this utterly familiar, common thing would suddenly be revealed to me with all the wonder with which we discover a thing which we have seen all our life and yet have never known before. Or again, it would be an American street with all its jumble of a thousand ugly architectures. It would be Montague Street or Fulton Street in Brooklyn, or Eleventh Street in New York, or other streets where I had lived; and suddenly I would see the gaunt and savage webbing of the elevated structure along Fulton Street, and how the light swarmed through in dusty, broken bars, and I could remember the old, familiar rusty color, that incomparable rusty color that gets into so many things here in America. And this also would be like something I had seen a million times and lived with all my life.

I would sit there, looking out upon the Avenue de l'Opéra and my life would ache with the whole memory of it; the desire to see it again; somehow to find a word for it; a language that would tell its shape, its color, the way we have

all known and felt and seen it. It was as if I had discovered a whole new universe of chemical elements and had begun to see certain relations between some of them but had by no means begun to organize the whole series into a harmonious and coherent union. From this time on, I think my efforts might be described as the effort to complete that organization, to discover that articulation for which I strove, to bring about that final coherent union.

I cannot really say the book was written. It was something that took hold of me and possessed me, and before I was done with it—that is, before I finally emerged with the first completed part—it seemed to me that it had done for me. It was exactly as if a great black storm cloud had opened up and, mid flashes of lightning, was pouring from its depth a torrential and ungovernable flood. Upon that flood everything was swept and borne along as by a great river. And I was borne along with it.

I spent the winter of that year in England from October until March, and here perhaps because of the homely familiarity of the English life, the sense of order and repose which such a life can give one, my work moved forward still another step from this flood tide chaos of creation. For the first time the work began to take on the lineaments of design. These lineaments were still confused and broken, sometimes utterly lost, but now I really did get the sense at last that I was working on a great block of marble, shaping a figure which no one but its maker could as yet define, but which was emerging more and more into the sinewy lines of composition.

From the beginning—and this was one fact that in all my times of hopelessness returned to fortify my faith in my conviction—the idea, the central legend that I wished my book to express had not changed. And this central idea was this: the deepest search in life, it seemed to me, the thing that in one way or another was central to all living was man's search

to find a father, not merely the father of his flesh, not merely the lost father of his youth, but the image of a strength and wisdom external to his need and superior to his hunger, to which the belief and power of his own life could be united.

So far as I can describe with any accuracy, the progress of that winter's work in England was not along the lines of planned design, but along this line that I have mentioned—writing some of the sections which I knew would have to be in the book. Meanwhile what was really going on in my whole creative consciousness, during all this time, although I did not realize it at the moment, was this: What I was really doing, what I had been doing all the time since my discovery of my America in Paris the summer before, was to explore day by day and month by month with a fanatic intensity, the whole material domain of my resources as a man and as a writer. This exploration went on for a period which I can estimate conservatively as two years and a half.

In a way, I think I was like the Ancient Mariner who told the Wedding Guest that his frame was wrenched by the woeful agony which forced him to begin his tale before it left him free. In my own experience, my wedding guests were the great ledgers in which I wrote, and the tale which I told to them would have seemed, I am afraid, completely incoherent, as meaningless as Chinese characters, had any reader seen them. I could by no means hope to give a comprehensive idea of its whole extent because three years of work and perhaps a million and a half words went into these books. It included everything from gigantic and staggering lists of the towns, cities, counties, states, and countries I had been in, to minutely thorough, desperately evocative descriptions of the undercarriage, the springs, wheels, flanges, axle rods, color, weight, and quality of the day coach of an American railway train. There were lists of the rooms and houses in which I had lived or in which I had slept for at

least a night, together with the most accurate and evocative descriptions of those rooms that I could write—their size, their shape, the color and design of the wallpaper, the way a towel hung down, the way a chair creaked, a streak of water rust upon the ceiling.

In addition, one might come upon other sections under some such cryptic heading as "Where now?" Under such a heading as this, there would be brief notations of those thousands of things which all of us have seen for just a flash, a moment in our lives, which seem to be of no consequence whatever at the moment that we see them, and which live in our minds and hearts forever, which are somehow pregnant with all the joy and sorrow of the human destiny, and which we know, somehow, are therefore more important than many things of more apparent consequence. "Where now?" Some quiet steps that came and passed along a leafy night-time street in summer in a little town down South long years ago; a woman's voice, her sudden burst of low and tender laughter; then the voices and the footsteps going, silence, the leafy rustle of the trees. "Where now?" Two trains that met and paused at a little station at some little town at some unknown moment upon the huge body of the continent; a girl who looked and smiled from the window of the other train; another passing in a motor car on the streets of Norfolk; the winter boarders in a little boarding house down South twenty years ago; Miss Florrie Mangle, the trained nurse; Miss Jessie Rimmer, the cashier at Reed's drug store; Dr. Richards, the clairvoyant; the pretty girl who cracked the whip and thrust her head into the lion's mouth with Johnny J. Jones Carnival and Combined Shows.

It may be objected, it has been objected already by certain critics, that in such research as I have here attempted to describe there is a quality of intemperate excess, an almost insane hunger to devour the entire body of human expe-

rience, to attempt to include more, experience more, than the measure of one life can hold, or than the limits of a single work of art can well define. I readily admit the validity of this criticism. I think I realize as well as anyone the fatal dangers that are consequent to such a ravenous desire, the damage it may wreak upon one's life and on one's work. But having had this thing within me, it was in no way possible for me to reason it out of me, no matter how cogently my reason worked against it. The only way I could meet it was to meet it squarely not with reason, but with life.

When I returned to America in the spring of 1931, although I had three or four hundred thousand words of material, I had nothing that could be published as a novel. Almost a year and a half had elapsed since the publication of my first book and already people had begun to ask that question which is so well meant, but which as year followed year was to become more intolerable to my ears than the most deliberate mockery: "Have you finished your next book yet?" "When is it going to be published?"

At this time I was sure that a few months of steady work would bring the book to completion. I found a place, a little basement flat in the Assyrian quarter in South Brooklyn, and there I went about my task.

The spring passed into the summer; the summer, into autumn. I was working hard, day after day, and still nothing that had the unity and design of a single work appeared. October came and with it a second full year since the publication of my first book. And now, for the first time, I was irrevocably committed so far as the publication of my book was concerned. I began to feel the sensation of pressure, and of naked desperation which was to become almost maddeningly intolerable in the next three years. For the first time I began to realize that my project was much larger than I thought it was.

All of this time I was being baffled by a certain time element in the book, by a time relation which could not be escaped, and for which I was now desperately seeking some structural channel. There were three time elements inherent in the material. The first and most obvious was an element of actual present time, an element which carried the narrative forward, which represented characters and events as living in the present and moving forward into an immediate future. The second time element was of past time, one which represented these same characters as acting and as being acted upon by all the accumulated impact of man's experience so that each moment of their life was conditioned not only by what they experienced in that moment, but by all that they had experienced up to that moment. In addition to these two time elements, there was a third which I conceived as being time immutable, the time of rivers, mountains, oceans, and the earth; a kind of eternal and unchanging universe of time against which would be projected the transience of man's life, the bitter briefness of his day. It was the tremendous problem of these three time elements that almost defeated me and that cost me countless hours of anguish in the years that were to follow.

As I began to realize the true nature of the task I had set for myself, the image of the river began to haunt my mind. I actually felt that I had a great river thrusting for release inside of me and that I had to find a channel into which its floodlike power could pour. I knew I had to find it or I would be destroyed in the flood of my own creation, and I am sure that every artist who ever lived has had the same experience.

I would work furiously day after day until my creative energies were utterly exhausted. I reached that state of naked need and utter isolation which every artist has got to meet and conquer if he is to survive at all. Before this I had been sustained by that delightful illusion of success which we all

have when we dream about the books we are going to write instead of actually doing them. Now I was face to face with it, and suddenly I realized that I had committed my life and my integrity so irrevocably to this struggle that I must conquer now or be destroyed. I was alone with my own work, and suddenly I knew that I had to be alone with it, that no one could help me with it now no matter how anyone might wish to help. For the first time I realized another naked fact which every artist must know, and that is that in a man's work there are contained not only the seeds of life, but the seeds of death, and that that power of creation which sustains us will also destroy us like a leprosy if we let it rot stillborn in our vitals. I had to get it out of me somehow. And now for the first time a terrible doubt began to creep into my mind that I might not live long enough to get it out of me, that I had created a labor so large and so impossible that the energy of a dozen lifetimes would not suffice for its accomplishment.

During this time, however, I was sustained by one piece of inestimable good fortune. I had for a friend a man who is, I believe, not only the greatest editor of his time, but a man of immense and patient wisdom and a gentle but unyielding fortitude. I think that if I was not destroyed at this time by the sense of hopelessness which these gigantic labors had awakened in me, it was largely because of the courage and patience of this man. I did not give in because he would not let me give in, and I think it is also true that at this particular time he had the advantage of being in the position of a skilled observer at a battle. I was myself engaged in that battle, covered by its dust and sweat and exhausted by its struggle, and I understood far less clearly than my friend the nature and the progress of the struggle in which I was engaged. At this time there was little that this man could do except observe, and in one way or another keep me at my task, and in many quiet and marvelous ways he succeeded in doing this.

My friend, the editor, has likened his own function at this painful time to that of a man who is trying to hang on to the fin of a plunging whale, but hang on he did, and it is to his tenacity that I owe my final release. Meanwhile, my creative power was functioning at the highest intensity it had ever known. I wrote at times without belief that I would ever finish, with nothing in me but black despair, and yet I wrote and wrote and could not give up writing.

People have sometimes asked me what happened to my life during these years. They have asked me how I ever found time to know anything that was going on in the world about me when my life was so completely absorbed by this world of writing. Well, it may seem to be an extraordinary fact, but the truth is that never in my whole life have I lived so fully, have I shared so richly in the common life of man as I did during these three years when I was struggling with the giant problem of my own work.

For one thing, my whole sensory and creative equipment, my powers of feeling and reflection—even the sense of hearing, and above all, my powers of memory, had reached the greatest degree of sharpness that they had ever known. At the end of the day of savage labor, my mind was still blazing with its effort, could by no opiate of reading, poetry, music, alcohol, or any other pleasure, be put at rest. I was unable to sleep, unable to subdue the tumult of these creative energies, and as a result of this condition, for three years I prowled the streets, explored the swarming web of the million-footed city and came to know it as I had never done before. It was a black time in the history of the nation, a black time in my own life and, I suppose, it is but natural that my own memory of it now should be a pretty grim and painful one.

Such was the state my life had come to in the early winter of 1933, and even at that moment, although I could not see it, the end of my huge labor was in sight. In the middle of

December of that year the great editor, of whom I have spoken, and who, during all this tormented period, had kept a quiet watch upon me, called me to his home and calmly informed me that my book was finished. I could only look at him with stunned surprise, and finally I only could tell him out of the depth of my own hopelessness that he was mistaken, that the book was not finished, that it could never be completed, that I could write no more. He answered with the same quiet finality that the book was finished whether I knew it or not, and then he told me to go to my room and spend the next week in collecting in its proper order the manuscript which had accumulated during the last two years.

I followed his instructions, still without hope and without belief. I worked for six days sitting in the middle of the floor surrounded by mountainous stacks of typed manuscript on every side. At the end of a week I had the first part of it together, and just two days before Christmas, 1933, I delivered to him the manuscript of "The October Fair," and a few days later, the manuscript of "The Hills Beyond Pentland." The manuscript of "The Fair" was, at that time, something over 1,000,000 words in length. He had seen most of it in its dismembered fragments during the three preceding years, but now, for the first time, he was seeing them in their sequential order, and once again his marvelous intuition was right; he had told me the truth when he said that I had finished the book.

It was not finished in any way that was publishable or readable. It was really not a book so much as it was the skeleton of a book, but for the first time in four years the skeleton was all there. An enormous labor of revision, weaving together, shaping, and, above all, cutting, remained, but I had the book now so that nothing, not even the despair of my own spirit, could take it from me. He told me so, and suddenly I saw that he was right. I was like a man who is

drowning and who suddenly, at the last gasp of his dying effort, feels earth beneath his feet again.

It was evident that many problems were before us, but now we had the thing, and we welcomed the labor before us with happy confidence. In the first place there was the problem of the book's gigantic length. Even in this skeletonized form the manuscript of "The October Fair" was over a million words in length, which is about twelve times the length of the average novel or twice the length of "War and Peace." It was manifest, therefore, that it would not only be utterly impossible to publish such a manuscript in a single volume, but that even if it were published in several volumes, the tremendous length of such a manuscript would practically annihilate its chances of ever finding a public which would read it.

This problem now faced us, and the editor grappled with it immediately. As his examination of the manuscript of "The October Fair" proceeded, he found that the book did describe two complete and separate cycles. The first of these was a movement which described the period of wandering and hunger in a man's youth. The second cycle described the period of greater certitude, and was dominated by the unity of a single passion. It was obvious, therefore, that what we had in the two cyclic movements of this book was really the material of two completely different chronicles, and although the second of the two was by far the more finished, the first cycle, of course, was the one which logically we ought to complete and publish first, and we decided on this course.

We took the first part. I immediately prepared a minutely thorough synopsis which described not only the course of the book from the first to the last, but which also included an analysis of those chapters which had been completed in their entirety, of those which were completed only in part, and of those which had not been written at all, and with this

synopsis before us, we set to work immediately to prepare the book for press. This work occupied me throughout the whole of the year 1934. The book was completed at the beginning of 1935, and was published in March of that year under the title of "Of Time and the River."

In the first place, the manuscript, even in its unfinished form, called for the most radical cutting, and because of the way in which the book had been written, as well as the fatigue which I now felt, I was not well prepared to do by myself the task that lay ahead of us.

Cutting had always been the most difficult and distasteful part of writing to me; my tendency had always been to write rather than to cut. Moreover, whatever critical faculty I may have had concerning my own work had been seriously impaired, for the time being at least, by the frenzied labor of the past four years. When a man's work has poured from him for almost five years like burning lava from a volcano; when all of it, however superfluous, has been given fire and passion by the white heat of his own creative energy, it is very difficult suddenly to become coldly surgical, ruthlessly detached.

To give a few concrete illustrations of the difficulties that now confronted us: The opening section of the book describes the journey of a train across the State of Virginia at night. Its function in the book is simply to introduce some of the chief characters, to indicate a central situation, to give something of the background from which the book proceeds, and perhaps through the movement of the train across the stillness of the earth to establish a certain beat, evoke a certain emotion which is inherent to the nature of the book. Such a section, therefore, undoubtedly serves an important function, but in proportion to the whole purport of the book, its function is a secondary one and must be related to the whole book in a proportionate way.

Now in the original version, the manuscript which described the journey of the train across Virginia at night was considerably longer than the average novel. What was needed was just an introductory chapter or two, and what I had written was over 100,000 words in length, and this same difficulty, this lack of proportion, was also evident in other parts of the manuscript.

What I had written about the great train was really good. But what I had to face, the very bitter lesson that everyone who wants to write has got to learn, was that a thing may in itself be the finest piece of writing one has ever done, and yet have absolutely no place in the manuscript one hopes to publish. This is a hard thing, but it must be faced, and so we faced it.

My spirit quivered at the bloody execution. My soul recoiled before the carnage of so many lovely things cut out upon which my heart was set. But it had to be done, and we did it. And so it went all up and down the line. Chapters 50,000 words long were reduced to ten or fifteen thousand words, and having faced this inevitable necessity, I finally acquired a kind of ruthlessness of my own, and once or twice, myself, did more cutting than my editor was willing to allow.

Meanwhile I was proceeding at full speed with the work of completing my design, finishing the unfinished parts and filling in the transition links which were essential.

This in itself was an enormous job and kept me writing all day long as hard as I could go for a full year. Here again the nature of my chief fault was manifest. I wrote too much again. I not only wrote what was essential, but time and time again my enthusiasm for a good scene, one of those enchanting vistas which can open up so magically to a man in the full flow of his creation would overpower me, and I would write thousands of words upon a scene which contributed nothing

of vital importance to a book whose greatest need already was ruthless condensation.

During the course of this year, I must have written well over a half million words of additional manuscript, of which, of course, only a small part was finally used.

The end came suddenly—the end of those five years of torment and incessant productivity. In October I took a trip to Chicago, a two weeks' vacation, my first in over a year. When I returned I found that my editor had quietly and decisively sent the manuscript to the press, the printers were already at work on it, the proof was beginning to come in. I had not foreseen it; I was desperate, bewildered. "You can't do it," I told him, "the book is not yet finished. I must have six months more on it."

To this he answered that the book was not only finished, but that if I took six months more on it, I would then demand another six months and six months more beyond that, and that I might very well become so obsessed with this one work that I would never get it published. He went on to say, and I think with complete justice, that such a course was wrong for me. I was not, he said, a Flaubert kind of writer. I was not a perfectionist. I had twenty, thirty, almost any number of books in me, and the important thing was to get them produced and not to spend the rest of my life in perfecting one book.

He told me finally that I would go on and do better work, that I would learn to work without so much confusion, waste, and useless torment, that my future books would more and more achieve the unity, sureness, and finality that every artist wants his work to have, but that I had to learn in the way I had learned, groping, struggling, finding my own way for myself, that this was the only way to learn.

In January 1935, I finished the last of my revisions on the proof; the first printed copies came from the press in

February. The book was released for final publication early in March. I was not here when it came out. I had taken a ship for Europe the week before, and as the ship got farther and farther from the American shores, my spirits sank lower and lower, reaching, I think, the lowest state of hopeless depression they had ever known. This, I believe, was largely a physical reaction, the inevitable effect of relaxation upon a human organism which had for five years been strained to its utmost limit. My life seemed to me to be like a great spring which had been taut for years and which was now slowly uncoiling from its tension. I had the most extraordinary sense of desolation I had ever known when I thought about my book. I had never realized until now how close I had been to it, how much a part of me it had become, and now that it had been taken away from me, my life felt utterly futile, hollow as a shell.

Now I had an overwhelming sense of shame greater than any I have felt before. I felt as if I had ruinously exposed myself as a pitiable fool who had no talent and who once and for all had completely vindicated the prophecies of the critics who had felt the first book was just a flash in the pan. It was in this frame of mind that I arrived in Paris on March 8, the day the book was to be published in America. I had come away to forget about it, and yet I thought about it all the time. I prowled the streets from night to morning, at least a dozen times in two short weeks I heard the celebration of mass at Sacré Cœur, and then would walk the streets again and come back to my hotel at ten o'clock and lie upon the bed, and still I could not sleep.

After several days of this, I steeled myself to go to the office of the travel agency where a message might be waiting for me. I found a cablegram there. It was from my publisher, and it said simply: "Magnificent reviews somewhat critical in ways expected, full of greatest praise."

NORMAN COUSINS *(born 1912) has been editor of the* Saturday Review of Literature *since 1940. Born in Union, New Jersey, and educated at Columbia, Mr. Cousins served as education editor of the* New York Post *and associate editor of* Current History *magazine before joining the* Saturday Review. *His editorials in the* SRL *have attracted wide attention, and one—"Modern Man Is Obsolete" (1945)—achieved a large circulation in book form and through reprintings in magazines and newspapers. Mr. Cousins is one of the leading American exponents of world government—a cause he has been urging since publication of his first book, "The Good Inheritance" (1942).*

14. After the First Novel

In the last [October 16, 1943] issue of *The Saturday Review,* four of the year's leading first novelists—Laura Hobson, Helen Howe, Bucklin Moon, and Betty Smith—considered the effect of criticism on their approach to novel writing. A least common denominator of their remarks seems to show a balanced and mature attitude toward literary criticism. As a group, they did not believe that, if they were to write the same novels again today, they would make radical changes—with the exception, of course, of such changes as might reflect the additional experiences accumulated in the sheer act of living and observing since their novels were completed.

The impression they gave was not that they were disdainful or oblivious of criticism—indeed, there was a humility and a consciousness of the problems of expression and developments that should cause the critics themselves to ponder again their own responsibilities—but that they realized that the function of good criticism is to stimulate and not to dictate. Unless the author himself has a firm grasp of his ideas and a highly developed sense of purpose he stands in danger of being buffeted about by the first critical wind that comes along. The author himself must resolve all the arguments; only he can decide whether he was right in doing as he did or as he proposes next to do. His job is to be a critic of the critics—to weed out the extraneous and the immaterial in the search for the criticism that cuts through to the essential points. He can recognize better than anyone else the valid criticism when he sees it; if he is worth his salt as a writer, he will absorb it in proper proportion into the broad outlines of his craft. But he will not be stampeded; he will not lose his own faculties of self-appraisal; he will not try to make of himself something he is not just because he believes that that is the way to approbation. The critic cannot write an author's novel for him; all he can do is to evaluate—and that is difficult enough.

Perhaps most interesting about the symposium of the first novelists was that all of them said or indicated that they were now at work on new books. And each of them seemed to recognize that in his second book lay the real test of his worth. The first book is generally more autobiographical than creative; usually it represents an overflow of welled-up experiences that can only find their outlet in fictional form. How many times have we seen full and rich first novels create literary sensations, with the promise of an unfolding harvest of literary plenty, only to discover that the first novel represented the be-all and end-all. Once the personal narrative was

exhausted, so was the author. He had neither creative imagination nor new experiences to fall back upon. Nor was he able to project himself into the experiences of others.

Some authors, of course, write out of wells of experience so deep that it is impossible for any book or any shelf of books to deplete the personal narrative. Tom Wolfe not only was unable to keep pace with the fabulous material yielded up by his own life; even in the act of writing he opened up new gushers which he could only hope he would some day be able to trap. Dos Passos, too, has written out of a vast personal store, keeping himself in the main currents, making himself an active part of what is after all a continuing story. The novelist who can do this need never fear a literary famine or stoppage.

The successful first novelist has our sympathy. He has yet to prove himself and he has to resist all sorts of byways or side streets, some of which may be very attractively paved. He can, as some of his illustrious contemporaries have been doing, write books that are actually moving-picture scripts—manuscripts that are acceptable enough and that can get by as books, but which will leave him all dressed up with no place to go as a novelist. One of the distinguishing and discouraging characteristics of too many novels of the last ten years is an almost eloquent obedience to the Hollywood formula—plenty of story, plenty of action, plenty of plot and suspense, with a proportionate dearth of mood and substance. The rewards are high for those writers who know how to make the formula work, and if that is their measure of success then they are to be congratulated upon their good fortune. But this is not the yardstick by which you can measure the development of good writing—using "good" not in the arbitrary sense but in the sense of independent and mature achievement.

Another pitfall of the first novelist is repetition. Having

hit the bull's eye once with a certain type of novel, there is always the temptation to try again with an almost identical commodity emphasizing the qualities or characteristics that seemed to have provoked the greatest approval the first time. It doesn't always work. Sometimes those very qualities now seem stale, badly overworked. When the young Carson McCullers published her first book, "The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter," her readers were enchanted by the strange, indefinable mood; the fascinating excursion into endless shadows. And yet, with her second book, "Reflections in a Golden Eye," we find a heightening or intensification of those same qualities to the detriment of the book. One step farther along the same road seemed to change everything; the shadows became mere recesses of neurotica.

But to talk about the problems of a first novelist is to launch a new encyclopedia, with new additions becoming almost mandatory with each new novel. And by far the largest number of these problems the novelist must work out for himself. Our only advice is this: keep your eyes open and be yourself.

The Short Story

W. SOMERSET MAUGHAM *is perhaps the most "professional" living practitioner of the craft of fiction. Born in 1874 at Paris, where his father was an attaché of the British embassy, Mr. Maugham was early orphaned and raised by relatives in Kent. He was trained as a physician but never practised; indeed, for nearly ten years he "starved" in Paris, determined to achieve his boyhood ambition of becoming an author. Finally, in 1907, he wrote a successful play, "Lady Frederick," and from then on a steady flow of popular novels, short stories, and plays came from his pen. Today he does his writing in a villa in the south of France, interrupting it for frequent visits to the United States. "Of Human Bondage" (1915), in part autobiographical, is probably his best novel, while his short story, "Miss Thompson" (1921), served as the basis for the celebrated play, "Rain."*

15. How I Write Short Stories

When I began to write short stories I was fortunately in a position of decent independence and I wrote them as a relief from work which I thought I had been too long concerned with. Most of them were written in groups from notes made as they occurred to me, and in each group I left, naturally enough, to the last those that seemed most difficult to write. A story is difficult to write when you do not know *all* about it from the beginning, but for part of it must trust to your imagination and experience. Sometimes the curve does not intuitively pre-

sent itself and you have to resort to this method and that to get the appropriate line.

I beg the reader not to be deceived by the fact that a good many of my stories are told in the first person into thinking that they are experiences of my own. This is merely a device to gain verisimilitude. It is one that has its defects, for it may strike the reader that the narrator could not know all the events he sets forth; and when he tells a story in the first person at one remove, when he reports, I mean, a story that someone tells him, it may very well seem that the speaker, a police officer, for example, or a sea captain, could never have expressed himself with such facility and with such elaboration. Every convention has its disadvantages. These must be as far as possible disguised and what cannot be disguised must be accepted. The advantage of this one is its directness. It makes it possible for the writer to tell no more than he knows. Making no claim to omniscience, he can frankly say when a motive or an occurrence is unknown to him, and thus often give his story a plausibility that it might otherwise lack. It tends also to put the reader on intimate terms with the author. Since Maupassant and Chekhov, who tried so hard to be objective, nevertheless are so nakedly personal, it has sometimes seemed to me that if the author can in no way keep himself out of his work it might be better if he put in as much of himself as possible. The danger is that he may put in too much and thus be as boring as a talker who insists on monopolizing the conversation. Like all conventions this one must be used with discretion.

In early youth I had written a number of short stories, but for a long time, twelve or fifteen years at least, occupied with the drama I had ceased to do so; and when a journey to the South Seas unexpectedly provided me with themes that seemed to suit this medium, it was as a beginner of over forty that I wrote the story which is now called "Rain." Since it caused some little stir, the reader of this article will perhaps have

patience with me if I transcribe the working notes, made at the time, on which it was constructed. They were written in hackneyed and slipshod phrases, without grace; for nature has not endowed me with the happy gift of hitting instinctively upon the perfect word to indicate an object and the unusual, but apt, adjective to describe it. I was travelling from Honolulu to Pago Pago and, hoping they might at some time be of service, I jotted down, as usual, my impressions of such of my fellow-passengers as attracted my attention. This is what I said of Miss Thompson:

> Plump, pretty in a coarse fashion, perhaps not more than twenty-seven. She wore a white dress and a large white hat, long white boots from which the calves bulged in cotton stockings.

There had been a raid on the Red Light district in Honolulu just before we sailed and the gossip of the ship spread the report that she was making the journey to escape arrest. My notes go on:

> *W. The Missionary.* He was a tall thin man, with long limbs loosely jointed, he had hollow cheeks and high cheek bones, his fine, large, dark eyes were deep in their sockets, he had full sensual lips, he wore his hair rather long. He had a cadaverous air and a look of suppressed fire. His hands were large, with long fingers, rather finely shaped. His naturally pale skin was deeply burned by the tropical sun.
>
> *Mrs. W. His Wife.* She was a little woman with her hair very elaborately done, New England; not prominent blue eyes behind gold-rimmed pince-nez, her face was long like a sheep's, but she gave no impression of foolishness, rather of extreme alertness. She had the quick movements of a bird. The most noticeable thing about her was her voice, high, metallic, and without inflection; it fell on the ear with a hard monotony, irritating to the nerves like the ceaseless clamor of a pneumatic drill. She was dressed in black and wore round her neck a gold chain from which hung a small cross. She told me that *W.* was a missionary on the Gilberts and his district consisting of widely separated islands he frequently had to go distances by canoe. During this

time she remained at headquarters and managed the mission. Often the seas were very rough and the journeys were not without peril. He was a medical missionary. She spoke of the depravity of the natives in a voice which nothing could hush, but with a vehement, unctuous horror, telling me of their marriage customs which were obscene beyond description. She said, when first they went it was impossible to find a single good girl in any of the villages. She inveighed against dancing.

I talked with the missionary and his wife but once, and with Miss Thompson not at all. Here is the note for the story:

A prostitute, flying from Honolulu after a raid, lands at Pago Pago. There lands there also a missionary and his wife. Also the narrator. All are obliged to stay there owing to an outbreak of measles. The missionary finding out her profession persecutes her. He reduces her to misery, shame, and repentance, he has no mercy on her. He induces the governor to order her return to Honolulu. One morning he is found with his throat cut by his own hand and she is once more radiant and self-possessed. She looks at men and scornfully exclaims: dirty pigs.

The reader may have observed that in the original note of "Rain" the narrator was introduced, but in the story as written omitted. "Rain" was invented by the accident of my happening upon persons here and there, who in themselves or from something I heard about them, suggested a theme that seemed suitable for a short story. This brings me to a topic that has always concerned writers and that has at times given the public, the writers' raw material, some uneasiness. There are authors who state that they never have a living model in mind when they create a character. I think they are mistaken. They are of this opinion because they have not scrutinized with sufficient care the recollections and impressions upon which they have constructed the person who, they fondly imagine, is of their invention. If they did they would discover that, unless he was

taken from some book they had read, a practice by no means uncommon, he was suggested by one or more persons they had at one time known or seen. The great writers of the past made no secret of the fact that their characters were founded on living people. We know that the good Sir Walter Scott, a man of the highest principles, portrayed his father, with sharpness first and then, when the passage of years had changed his temper, with tolerance; Henri Beyle, in the manuscript of at least one of his novels, has written in at the side the names of the real persons who were his models; and this is what Turgeniev himself says: "For my part, I ought to confess that I never attempted to create a type without having, not an idea, but a living person, in whom the various elements were harmonized together, to work from. I have always needed some groundwork on which I could tread firmly."

With Flaubert it is the same story; that Dickens used his friends and relations freely is notorious; and if you read the "Journal" of Jules Renard, a most instructive book to anyone who wishes to know how a writer works, you will see the care with which he set down every little detail about the habits, ways of speech and appearance, of the persons he knew. When he came to write a novel he made use of this storehouse of carefully collected information. In Chekhov's diary you will find notes which were obviously made for use at some future time, and in the recollections of his friends there are frequent references to the persons who were the originals of certain of his characters. It looks as though the practice were very common. I should have said it was necessary and inevitable. Its convenience is obvious. You are much more likely to depict a character who is a recognizable human being, with his own individuality, if you have a living model. The imagination can create nothing out of the void. It needs the stimulus of sensation. The writer whose creative faculty has been moved by something peculiar in a person (peculiar perhaps only to the

writer) falsifies his idea if he attempts to describe that person other than as he sees him. Character hangs together and if you try to throw people off the scent, by making a short man tall for example (as though stature had no effect on character), or by making him choleric when he has the concomitant traits of an equable temper, you will destroy the plausible harmony (to use the beautiful phrase of Baltasar Gracian) of which it consists. The whole affair would be plain sailing if it were not for the feelings of the persons concerned. The writer has to consider the vanity of the human race and the *Schadenfreude* which is one of its commonest and most detestable failings. A man's friends will find pleasure in recognizing him in a book and though the author may never even have seen him will point out to him, especially if it is unflattering, what they consider his living image. Often someone will recognize a trait he knows in himself or a description of the place he lives in and in his conceit jumps to the conclusion that the character described is a portrait of himself. Thus in my story called "The Outstation" the Resident was suggested by a British Consul I had once known in Spain and it was written ten years after his death, but I have heard that the Resident of a district in Sarawak, which I described in the story, was much affronted because he thought I had had him in mind. The two men had not a trait in common.

I do not suppose any writer attempts to draw an exact portrait. Nothing, indeed, is so unwise as to put into a work of fiction a person drawn line by line from life. His values are all wrong, and, strangely enough, he does not make the other characters in the story seem false, but himself. He never convinces. That is why the many writers who have been attracted by the singular and powerful figure of the late Lord Northcliffe have never succeeded in presenting a credible personage. The model a writer chooses is seen through his own temperament and if he is a writer of any originality what he sees need

have little relation with the facts. He may see a tall one short or a generous one avaricious; but, I repeat, if he sees him tall, tall he must remain. He takes only what he wants of the living man. He uses him as a peg on which to hang his own fancies. To achieve his end (the plausible harmony that nature so seldom provides) he gives him traits that the model does not possess. He makes him coherent and substantial. The created character, the result of imagination founded on fact, is art, and life in the raw, as we know, is of this only the material.

The odd thing is that when the charge is made that an author has copied this person or the other from life, emphasis is laid only on the less praiseworthy characteristics of the victim. If you say of a character that he is kind to his mother, but beats his wife, everyone will cry: Ah, that's Brown, how beastly to say he beats his wife; and no one thinks for a moment of Jones and Robinson who are notoriously kind to their mothers. I draw from this the somewhat surprising conclusion that we know our friends by their vices and not by their virtues. I have stated that I never even spoke to Miss Thompson in "Rain." This is a character that the world has not found wanting in vividness. Though but one of a multitude of writers my practice is doubtless common to most, so that I may be permitted to give another instance of it. I was once asked to meet at dinner two persons, a husband and wife, of whom I was told only what the reader will shortly read. I think I never knew their names. I should certainly not recognize them if I met them in the street. Here are the notes I made at the time:

A stout, rather pompous man of fifty, with pince-nez, gray-haired, a florid complexion, blue eyes, a neat gray moustache. He talks with assurance. He is resident of an outlying district and is somewhat impressed with the importance of his position. He despises the men who have let themselves go under the influence of the climate and the surroundings. He has travelled extensively during his short leaves in the East and knows Java, the Philippines, the coast of China and the

Malay Peninsula. He is very British, very patriotic; he takes a great deal of exercise. He has been a very heavy drinker and always took a bottle of whiskey to bed with him. His wife has entirely cured him and now he drinks nothing but water. She is a little insignificant woman, with sharp features, thin, with a sallow skin and a flat chest. She is very badly dressed. She has all the prejudices of an Englishwoman. All her family for generations have been in second-rate regiments. Except that you know that she has caused her husband to cease drinking entirely you would think her quite colorless and unimportant.

On these materials I invented a story which is called "Before the Party." I do not believe that any candid person could think that these two people had cause for complaint because they had been made use of. It is true that I should never have thought of the story if I had not met them, but anyone who takes the trouble to read it will see how insignificant was the incident (the taking of the bottle to bed) that suggested it and how differently the two chief characters have in the course of writing developed from the brief sketch which was their foundation.

"Critics are like horse-flies which prevent the horse from ploughing," said Chekhov. "For over twenty years I have read criticisms of my stories, and I do not remember a single remark of any value or one word of valuable advice. Only once Skabichevsky wrote something which made an impression on me. He said I would die in a ditch, drunk." He was writing for twenty-five years and during that time his writing was constantly attacked. I do not know whether the critics of the present day are naturally of a less ferocious temper; I must allow that on the whole the judgment that has been passed on my own stories when from time to time a collection has been published in book form has been favorable. One epithet, however, has been much applied to them, which has puzzled me; they have been described with disconcerting frequency as "competent." Now on the face of it I might have thought this laudatory, for

to do a thing competently is certainly more deserving of praise than to do it incompetently, but the adjective has been used in a disparaging sense and, anxious to learn and if possible to improve, I have asked myself what was in the mind of the critics who thus employed it. Of course none of us is liked by everybody and it is necessary that a man's writing, which is so intimate a revelation of himself, should be repulsive to persons who are naturally antagonistic to the creature he is. This should leave him unperturbed. But when an author's work is fairly commonly found to have a quality that is unattractive to many people it is sensible of him to give the matter his attention. There is evidently something that a number of people do not like in my stories and it is this they try to express when they damn them with the faint praise of competence. I have a notion that it is the definiteness of their form. I hazard the suggestion (perhaps unduly flattering to myself) because this particular criticism has never been made in France where my stories have had with the critics and the public much greater success than they have had in England.

The French, with their classical sense and their orderly minds, demand a precise form and are exasperated by a work in which the ends are left lying about, themes are propounded and not resolved and a climax is foreseen and then eluded. This precision on the other hand has always been slightly antipathetic to the English. Our great novels have been shapeless and this, far from disconcerting their readers, has given them a sense of security. This is the life we know, they have thought, with its arbitrariness and inconsequence; we can put out of our minds the irritating thought that two and two make four. If I am right in this surmise I can do nothing about it and I must resign myself to being called competent for the rest of my days. My prepossessions in the arts are on the side of law and order. I like a story that fits. I did not take to writing stories seriously till I had had much experience as a dramatist,

and this experience taught me to leave out everything that did not serve the dramatic value of my story. It taught me to make incident follow incident in such a manner as to lead up to the climax I had in mind. I am not unaware of the disadvantages of this method. It gives a tightness of effect that is sometimes disconcerting. You feel that life does not dovetail into its various parts with such neatness. In life stories straggle, they begin nowhere and tail off without a point. That is probably what Chekhov meant when he said that stories should have neither a beginning nor an end. It is certain that sometimes it gives you a sensation of airlessness when you see persons who behave so exactly according to character and incidents that fall into place with such perfect convenience. The storyteller of this kind aims not only at giving his own feelings about life, but at a formal decoration. He arranges life to suit his purposes. He follows a design in his mind, leaving out this and changing that; he distorts facts to his advantage, according to his plan; and when he attains his object produces a work of art. He seeks to prove nothing. He paints a picture and sets it before you. You can take it or leave it.

The Historical Novel

BEN AMES WILLIAMS *is one of the most widely-read writers of historical novels. Born in Macon, Mississippi, in 1889 of Southern and Yankee stock, he grew up in Ohio and Massachusetts. Following his graduation from Dartmouth in 1910, Mr. Williams did a six-year stint as a reporter for the* Boston American. *Meanwhile, he became a prolific producer of short stories for* All-Story Magazine, *and later for the* Saturday Evening Post *and* Collier's. *In recent years he has devoted his full time to fiction-writing. Mr. Williams's series of short stories about Searsport, Maine—which became the fictional Fraternity Village—attracted a faithful following, but he attained his largest audience through his novels. Among his recent books with a period setting are "The Strange Woman" (1941) and "House Divided" (1948).*

16. Fiction's Fourth Dimension

There is no such thing as a non-historical novel. Within the pages of every work of fiction rests circumstantial evidence that will reveal to the sufficiently well-informed reader the particular period during which the action occurs. It is not necessary to read that the heroine traveled by stage-coach, or rode a bicycle, or drove a car, or boarded a plane; emotional reactions and moral standards may date a novel as explicitly as hoop skirts or knee breeches, as rapiers or revolvers, as cars that must be cranked.

Because of this fourth-dimensional quality of fiction, every novel is in greater or lesser degree a contribution to history; and a novel whose entire action occurs in a single day in 1950 may prove to be a valuable source book for the historian writing in the year 2000. It will hardly give him any facts not already familiar, but it may well enlighten him about the manners and customs of people who lived in 1950.

But the adjective "historical" has come to be restricted to novels through whose pages move at least a few famous men with famous names, just as the noun "history" has come to be applied to any factual—or pseudo-factual—book of nonfiction which concerns itself with persons and incidents conspicuous in the past. There are novels whose action occurs in the dated past but in whose pages no familiar characters appear, no familiar names are mentioned, and "history" plays no part; but no one classes "Anna Karenina" or "Madame Bovary" among "historical" novels. Yet just as a novel laid in the past need not be "historical," so a novel laid in the present may be.

A historical novel deserving that honorable name seeks to present an accurate and unprejudiced picture of some phase of history; but this may be merely incidental to the novel's theme. My first long novel, as an example, was in this category. In my twenties, I rebelled at the textbooks of history because they dealt almost wholly with wars and rumors of wars; with kings, and presidents, and such exalted personages. I thought true history should record the changing way of life of the everyday individual. So this first novel of mine was written to tell the life story of an ordinary man. In order to do that adequately, I felt it necessary to follow, day by day, the events which had occurred during those years of his life which I meant to cover. This led me to read with some care the complete files of one of the Boston newspapers from 1885 to 1910, and to incorporate

in the novel many references to current events likely to have interested my leading character.

This reading—research, if you like—had an indirect result: it revealed to me how little I knew about the history of my own lifetime. Since then, further study has shown me how little I knew about the history of my country. Yet I had had the normal number of school and college courses in history. But to pick up one of my own—or one of my children's—textbooks today is to discover that they are not only incomplete, but inaccurate, unintelligent, and—worst of all—uninteresting. It was reading historical novels which led me to read French, German, Roman, and American histories. The novels provoked in me a curiosity they did not satisfy. I began to suspect that most people today learn more about history from novels than from textbooks. Textbooks are studied on assignment, a few pages or a chapter at a time. They are read as a task; to read them is no pleasure; they are as dull as dates. But the novel is written to be read. Well done, it catches and holds the reader's attention; and it is read with eager zeal, and as rapidly as the reader's capacity permits. The reader sees, instead of a skeletonized and often disjointed narrative hung on dates, a coherent and more or less complete picture; and in many cases the interest thus provoked will lead him to further reading.

It was my belief that—even in wartime—the lives of ordinary stay-at-home people are more important to the world than the deeds of generals and statesmen, which led me to begin at last a series of novels, each one of which would deal with life somewhere in the United States while this country was at war. I had served an apprenticeship at the business of research, since there are few pieces of fiction which can be written without seeking out some facts. Thus my first long novel required me to find out what had happened in my own lifetime; my second required me to learn as much as possible

about voice culture, and each succeeding novel made new demands, which had to be met.

John Erskine, many years ago, stated the proposition that a writer's surest way to find an audience is to write of the familiar; and he proceeded to demonstrate that proposition in his own novels. But to write of the familiar has its pitfalls; for on familiar matters the reader has preconceptions, sometimes true and sometimes false. For the novelist to violate those preconceptions, whether through ignorance, or by accident, or deliberately because those preconceptions are mistaken, is to provoke in the reader's mind a question, and hence to lose some of his attention. Herbert Spencer said the first principle of successful composition is to economize your reader's attention; so when the reader pauses to question or deny something the author has said, to that extent the author has failed.

Yet the author of the historical novel, if his work is sound, must often do just this. The American Revolution was made by the mob and the mob's leaders, and the great majority of all persons of intelligence and property were Tories, actively or passively opposing the Revolution. Yet to say this in a novel is to provoke thousands of uninformed readers to passionate and angry dissent. The careful and conscientious author must face this hurdle and surmount it if he can.

It is to enable him to do this that he pushes his study of the period with which he means to deal to the utmost lengths. An author who was willing to do so could read a school textbook of American history and write a novel about the War between the States; and if his novel were interesting, his readers would accept his statements as facts, for few readers know the past well enough to distinguish the true from the false, and the run-of-the-mine critic is not much better informed. Yet if the novel violates truth in little things, though it may deceive the critic, it does not always deceive the reader. A novel appeared a few years ago, laid in the early nineteenth century, in which the

hero loaded his flintlock rifle by ramming home a ball, then a wad, and then the powder. Critics in the leading newspapers acclaimed his accurate local color; but in spite of critical superlatives, readers recognized the novel for what it was—a fabrication based on ignorance—and ignored it with relative unanimity. The wise author realizes that he must seek to know whereof he speaks; that if he is ignorant, the reader will sense that fact.

The author, when he begins to investigate his period, may work from the present backward. He may read, first, relatively modern books, and then explore the volumes listed in their bibliographies, read as many of them as seem likely to be useful—and investigate their bibliographies in turn for further leads. Eventually he will thus arrive at what might be called "source materials": official documents, private diaries in book form or in manuscript, letters, and contemporary commentaries on the events which interest him.

But he will learn to look with a suspicious eye on all so-called sources which have been published in book form, except such publications as the official records of the War between the States and other compendiums of original and presumably authentic documents. Published diaries—and, even more certainly—published memoirs written after the fact, have all passed through the hands of some editor, who may have let his personal opinions guide his pen. I recently prepared for republication Mrs. Mary Boykin Chesnut's "Diary from Dixie," one of the best published sources of private life in the South during the War of the Sixties. The original diary was edited and copied by Mrs. Chesnut herself, and she elided many passages, as for instance, those dealing with her early dislike of Mrs. Jefferson Davis, whom she later came to like and to admire. Her manuscript ran to about 400,000 words. After her death, it was edited by one of her friends, working in

collaboration with a professional writer. They elided everything which would offend persons then (1905) still living, or likely to outrage what was then the prevailing sentiment in the South. Their manuscript, running to about 150,000 words, was published in 1905. I worked from Mrs. Chesnut's own edited version, plus some surviving fragments of the original diary; and I omitted some material used by the previous editors, and included masses of keenly interesting matter which they blue-penciled. The result was a manuscript of 250,000 words—which the publishers in turn found it necessary somewhat to reduce.

Thus Mrs. Chesnut's diary has been edited by herself, by two collaborators, by me, and by the editors of Houghton Mifflin Company; and it is presumably true that all diaries which find book publication are subjected to a similar process—and to that extent are subject to rigid questioning.

Aside from published contemporary documents, and unpublished letters and diaries, the most trustworthy source materials may well be contemporary newspapers. Once published, the daily or weekly newspaper acquires a certain irrevocability. Unless an entire edition is recaptured and destroyed or reprinted, the newspaper is not subject to revision. "The moving finger writes, and having writ, moves on; nor all your piety nor wit shall lure it back to cancel half a line. . . ." To read the newspapers of the day may not give the writer an accurate picture of events, but it will tell him what—on that particular day—people thought was true; and it will also tell him what they wore, what they bought and sold, what their dollars would buy, what plays they saw, what actors and actresses they admired, what books they read. He will learn a thousand details of everyday life which he can learn in no other way. Portable houses were sold in Richmond after the fire in 1865. Men had fountain pens. At least one Southern

editor thought the indignation at General Butler's order dealing with New Orleans women was simulated, not genuine—and not justifiable. A speech in the English House of Lords, advocating recognition of the Confederacy, on the ground that victory for the North would be followed by an attempt by the North to conquer the world, might with a few changes read like a denunciation of Hitler in 1939. An expert on highway construction predicted in 1897 that the automobile, with rubber tires, would be so harmless to highways that the expense of road construction would be greatly reduced. An American naval expert predicted in 1940 or 1941 that war with Japan would result in victory for the United States within six weeks. These facts are to be found in newspapers, not elsewhere; they are more enlightening than many a formal volume.

In published books, in newspapers of the day, and in unpublished manuscripts, the author can find substantially all he needs or wishes to know; substantially all, but not all. He cannot, except by occasional circumstantial evidence, hear conversation; he cannot know how people talked. In the future, writing of today, the author will listen to phonograph recordings of speeches, songs, plays, broadcasts; but the author today, writing of the past, cannot do this. He must in writing dialogue seek to be plausible and inconspicuous, must avoid making his reader pause and protest: "People did not say that then." Even if he has authority for the use of slang phrases, it is dangerous to use any which are familiar to modern ears. The fact that a person in 1775 might have referred to a young man as a "drip" or a "jerk" does not justify allowing a character to do that in fiction, because to do so distracts the reader's attention. Much of our modern slang is older than we think. In Mrs. Chesnut's original diary, speaking of an incident which mightily pleased one of her relatives, she said, "That was nuts for the Judge." But an author who allowed a char-

acter to use that slang phrase in a novel of the 1860's would risk distracting his readers.

To write historical novels is to attempt to recreate some portion of the past. The first thing that the novelist discovers, when he begins to study the past, is that there is nothing new under the sun. The prophets were as consistently wrong in 1775, in 1812, in 1860, and in 1914 as they were in 1939, or in 1942. Germans, said the propaganda, crucified Canadians in Belgium in 1914; Southerners, said the propaganda, crucified Yankees at First Manassas. Profiteers, hoarders, deserters, draft dodgers—there were as many in 1776 and in 1864 as in 1918 or 1943. Statesmen as regularly said they believed things which actually they did not believe in 1812 as in 1942. The ordinary man and woman as readily pretended to believe statements they knew were lies in 1864 as in 1918 or in 1945. The abrogation of common sense, the credulity of terror, the factitious hatred of the enemy; such manifestations persist through history. The newspapers as eagerly distorted facts to please their readers, or stated as true what they knew could not be true, in the past as in the present. In late June and early July 1863 as many Southerners believed Lee had captured Philadelphia and Baltimore as Americans in 1940 believed the British fleet had entered Oslo Harbor and ordered the Germans out. The war pattern is always the same. Only names are changed.

No man knows himself unless he knows his ancestors; no nation knows itself unless it knows its past. A knowledge of American history derived from a semester's study of a 250-page textbook is worse than no knowledge at all. The valid historical novel may synthesize the contents of half a thousand volumes in a few hundred pages; the matter included in one chapter in a textbook may go to make a hundred such novels. To write such novels is not only to amuse, to entertain; it is to

give the reader some knowledge of at least one aspect of his country's past.

And it is important for every citizen to have this knowledge; for by knowing the past he can more intelligently know the present. The text of every sound historical novel is the same. There is no past; the past is now.

The Whodunit

REX STOUT *(born 1886) is known wherever detective stories are read as the creator of the elephantine, orchid-raising sleuth, Nero Wolfe, and his wisecracking Watson, Archie Goodwin, whose exploits he has chronicled in more than a dozen volumes. Since Mr. Stout left his native Noblesville, Indiana, he has been at various times a yeoman in the Navy, a cigar-store clerk, the inventor and promoter of a school-banking system, a frequent contributor to the old* Masses, *a book publisher, an expatriate in Paris, and the author of several novels that were not too successful. But when he gave birth to Nero and Archie in "Fer-de-Lance" in 1934, he found himself launched on a career that has kept him busy ever since.*

17. Crime in Fiction

People say that Sherlock Holmes is the most widely known fictional character in all the literature of the world, and there is impressive evidence that they are right. Usually, having said it, they go on to ask why, and have no answer. They are puzzled and not a little irritated. What right has this fantastic bloodhound to the top of a peak whence he can look down upon Achilles, Medea, Don Quixote, Hamlet, Père Goriot, Anna Karenina, Karamazov, Old Scrooge, Tom Sawyer, Tarzan, and Scarlett O'Hara?

I have thought it over and I think I know. You have the answer as soon as you reflect not on what man is, but on what

he likes to think he is. He calls himself *homo* but, not satisfied with that, makes it *homo sapiens.* His best-liked and best-known definition of himself is not the virtuous animal, or the passionate animal, or the handsome animal, or the just or merciful animal, but the reasoning animal. Sherlock Holmes is the embodiment of man's greatest pride and greatest weakness: his reason. I have heard it said by sneerers that he isn't even human. Certainly he isn't; but he is human aspiration. He is what our ancestors had in mind when in wistful braggadocio they tacked the *sapiens* onto the *homo.*

Man insists on nothing more desperately than that his emotions are controlled by his rational processes. More often than not, he actually believes it up to the selvage of his consciousness. Rationalization of an action or decision dictated by an emotion is, indeed, a primary function of the mind. It is an ironically thankless task, since it must contrive the conclusion that the action or decision was itself reasonable and therefore no rationalization was called for. As homo sapiens we resent—with a resentment usually too deep for awareness, let alone expression—being constantly bullied by our emotions, not only into action or decision but also into a frantic search for excuses for them.

We enjoy reading about people in the same fix. We enjoy reading about people who love and hate and covet—about gluttons and martyrs, misers and sadists, whores and saints, brave men and cowards. But also, demonstrably, we enjoy reading about a man who gloriously acts and decides, with no exception and no compunction, not as his emotions brutally command, but as his reason instructs. So Sherlock Holmes is on his peak.

This basic principle, this essence, of detective stories and the public's insatiable appetite for them, is understood (or felt) quite well by some of the writers in the genre, imperfectly by others, and not at all by some. Dashiell Hammett's

Sam Spade, for instance, is as true an exemplar as Holmes himself. Sam Spade is by no means without emotions—his are uncommonly fierce and hair-triggered—but they are not allowed even to be sergeants, let alone staff officers, in his campaign to get the murderer of Miles Archer and put his hands on the maltese falcon. Never has reason more heroically told an emotion to go soak its head than in the unforgettable last chapter of that book. Erle Stanley Gardner's Perry Mason knows what his role is and acts it. Agatha Christie's Hercule Poirot not only acts it but talks it, with his frequent references to his little gray cells. Philo Vance, not content to exclude emotions from his Board of Directors, wouldn't tolerate them around the place at all, which was a mistake, since the idea is not the extinction of emotions but merely their relegation to the auxiliaries, as is fitting in a reasoning animal.

It seems to me that Lord Peter Wimsey might have had no superior, and possibly no peer, if only Dorothy Sayers had understood (or felt) the essence of her job. I am told that she now hates Wimsey and will not permit his name to be spoken in her presence—and no wonder, considering the trouble he caused her. He was even ass enough to fall in love with a young woman who was under arrest for murder, the murder he was working on, and actually married her! In another story, on the evening of the execution of a murderer he had run to earth, compassion and misgiving kept him sleepless all night. A weakling! Anyway, evenings of execution of the real culprits have no place in detective stories. We have triumphantly rationalized executions, but a sneaking suspicion remains that an emotion or two may be implicated. A detective story ends when reason's job is done.

Here in the United States we call them mysteries, which is a pity. I don't know who started it. That meaningless and inane appellation is probably responsible for much of the chaotic silliness being perpetrated by writers, editors, and publishers.

A story that lets the reader in as an eyewitness to a murder in the first chapter, and then lets him watch the murderer wriggle and dodge and twist until, at the end, his doom overtakes him; a story in which five or six people kill ten or twelve people and finally one of the survivors gets arrested somehow; a story in which an assortment of investigators, both amateur and professional, tries to trap a murderer and fails ignominiously, and the creature is eventually nabbed by pure luck; and, heaven help us, many others—all these are published as mysteries. I am not turning up my nose at them. All I ask of any story is that it give me my money's worth—and my time's worth—one way or another. But to list such tales in the same category as detective stories is plainly nonsensical. It confuses not only the buyers and readers and editors, but also the writers, and is, I believe, to blame for the current tendency to regard detective-story writing as a moribund art. Young emerging talent is surely bewildered by it, and repelled.

Detective stories need all the talent they can get, since they confront the writer with two extraordinary handicaps. The first is inherent, the essence itself. Emotion is not taboo. Quite the contrary, the more the better. Since the peg the story hangs on is murder (it could be any crime, but the reasons for using murder instead of some lesser one are obvious), and since a murder neither preceded nor followed by violent emotions would be rather implausible, emotion is indeed mandatory. But no emotion must ever be allowed to usurp the center of the stage, and none can be permitted to deflect the hero a hair's breadth in his remorseless stalking of the dragon. For the true hero is not only not a man driven by love or hate or cupidity or fear; it is not a man at all; it is merely a faculty of man, the one that makes him unique and therefore the one he most loudly proclaims. The detective is only the personifi-

cation of that faculty, and to have a personification for a hero is a considerable handicap.

The second handicap is technical. The writing job is to make a good story out of a man performing a feat of reason. The devil of it is that the most exciting and impressive part of the performance must be concealed from the reader—or at least the reader must not know what is exciting and impressive and what isn't. That is the pattern set by Poe, and no one has ever deviated from it without making a mess. I don't know why. Since the essence of the thing is to demonstrate the capacity of human reason to smash or surmount all obstacles in the search for truth, theoretically it could be done just as effectively, even more so, by letting the reader participate wholly in all phases of the operation. Actually, it doesn't work that way. At any rate, the Poe pattern is universally followed by all writers of detective stories that deserve the name, and it isn't easy. For a task of comparable technical difficulty, a novelist might try to write a tale of tender passion in which the lover is identified but the loved one is not—until the fifth page from the last. Not that no novelist could do it. In plotting "The Brothers Karamazov," Dostoievsky almost certainly used the Poe pattern as a model, but, since he was writing a novel and not a detective story, and, since he was Dostoievsky, he let emotions run the show.

Understanding (or feeling) the essence, then, and aware of the two severe handicaps, a man starts to write a detective story. What are his problems and how is he to solve them? I won't presume to speak of the problems he shares with all other writers of fiction, such as the function of the paragraph, the foreshortening of dialogue, the smooth and unobtrusive transition from scene to scene, the change of pace, and a thousand others. The question is, what are the problems peculiar to his job?

He must, first of all, know his detective intimately. He may

jerrybuild all the others, including the victim and even the murderer, out of odds and ends—but not the detective. It may be, as I am convinced it is, that what holds the reader is the spectacle of human reason fighting its way through a morass of brute emotions to the solid clean ground of truth, and that the detective is only the personification of reason, but that makes it all the more desirable for the personification to be a man and not a puppet. That, I think, is why nearly all of the finest detective stories are about detectives who appear not in one tale but in a series. Creating a man, especially one who is to be a plausible and exciting personification of the faculty that we think most flattering, can't be done by just snapping the fingers. It is not surprising that Poe and Doyle and Gaboriau and Chesterton and Sayers, having once got him, held on to him. Nor is this a contradiction of my concession that Sherlock Holmes is not human. He is human as a man, but not as a detective. He is human when he plays the violin or gets impatient with Watson or puts his tobacco in an old slipper, but not when he glances at a bit of ash and knows the name of the cigar it came from. Then he is the flaming realization of man's most ambitious dream, and no character in a dream is human.

Having created his man-detective, and knowing him inside and out, the writer faces the problem of method. It is impossible to have the detective himself tell the story. That has been tried but never with success, because there can be no justification for postponement of the revelation to the end. There is a chance that the writer has it in him to invent something new, as Agatha Christie did in her brilliant tour de force "The Murder of Roger Ackroyd," but the chance is remote. The most direct method is straight third-person narrative from the viewpoint of the detective. That has the advantage of keeping the hero always on stage, but it makes the postponement of the revelation, though not impossible, extremely diffi-

cult. Chesterton handles it fairly well with Father Brown, Christie with Poirot, a little better, but not much, Sayers still better with Wimsey, and Hammett to perfection with Sam Spade.

Another method is third-person narrative from no single viewpoint—the method of most novels. This is the simplest and easiest as far as construction goes, which accounts for its popularity, but it has seldom produced a first-rate detective story. The reason is obvious. A detective story is not a tale about the motives and acts and emotions of people, as a novel is, but about the detective's investigation of their motives and acts and emotions in his pursuit of a relentless purpose. Therefore, if Chapter Six takes us to the bedroom of Mr. and Mrs. Doe and lets us see what they're doing and hear what they're saying, no matter how touching or humorous or subtle or exciting it may be, what of it? It is quite extraneous. Since the proper and only theme of a detective story is the progress of the hero to his triumph, anything that happens beyond the horizon of his senses and sense has no pertinence. I could rattle off the names of several good storytellers who have completely overlooked this elementary fact, and doubtless you could too.

Which leaves us Dupin's friend and admirer (who knows his name?), Holmes's Watson, and their many descendants. This is the method best suited to the job. It keeps the reader at the viewpoint where he belongs—close to the hero—, supplies a foil for the hero's transcendence and infallibility, and makes the postponement of the revelation vastly less difficult. Also, if your imagination is up to the task of making the stooge a man instead of a dummy he will be handy to have around in many other ways. Even stuffed with sawdust he can handle your toughest technical problems; with some flesh on him and a little blood in his veins he can be a jewel.

Having assembled the personnel and got the plot, or at least

its skeleton, it is time for the typewriter. Throughout the long adventure—and tedium—of composition you are of course constantly being confronted by the challenges that all story-tellers must face and somehow meet, but the special one that is always with you, on every page and in every sentence, is the postponement of revelation. In a sense, certainly, every story-teller is always writing two chapters at once—the one he is working on and the last one—but the detective-story writer must do so under a unique necessity and pressure. The pattern requires the postponement of the revelation, but, unless he carefully and ingeniously restricts the area of the revelation within the narrowest limits the plot will allow, he will at the end find himself glaring at the dilemma of either leaving many things unexplained, which is inadmissible, or forcing the detective to go on for twenty pages tidying up, which is no way to treat a hero, not to mention a reader. The one thing that must be reserved is the identity of the culprit; the nearer you can come, before that fatal disclosure, to dusting everything else off, the better.

And when you have understood (or felt) the essence, created your detective, contrived your plot and characters, and put on paper all the words and paragraphs and chapters up to and including the revelation, what have you got?

There is disagreement about that. Not long ago I heard a distinguished critic, hot in argument, demand indignantly to be told whether the world-wide interest in Sherlock Holmes entitled him to a seat in the same room as King Lear. It would be hard to beat that for downright silliness. He might as well have asked whether Alice is entitled to drink tea with Lady Macbeth.

But silly as the critic was, we know what was eating him. He was merely concurring in the universal refusal to accord any detective story, even the best, any place whatever, even the lowest, in the ranks of what is called serious literature.

No one would dream of speaking of Doyle in the same tone of voice as of Thackeray, though one is still being read in twenty languages and the other is not read at all. I say this not to complain, because there is no grievance. The detective story has to lie in the bed it has made. It gets its enormous audience, everybody from prime ministers to cab drivers, from the greatest to the humblest, by outrageous and bare-faced flattery. It tells over and over again, with what wit and ingenuity it can manage, two flagrant lies: that justice is always done and that man's reason orders his affairs. Men love it, desire it, need it, and pay money for it. But they don't really believe it, and they can't be expected to take seriously something they don't really believe.

No. The writer of a detective story must be content to have written a fairy story, and about man's best-loved fairy—the one whose wand bestows on him not power or love or health or wealth, but the sweet assurance, "You are the reasoning animal."

Juvenile Fiction

ALICE DALGLIESH *is a veteran editor and the author of more than twenty-five successful books for children. Born in Trinidad, B.W.I., in 1893, Miss Dalgliesh was educated in England and at Teachers College, Columbia University. She is now head of the children's book department of Charles Scribner's Sons. Her books include "America Travels," "A Book for Jennifer," and "The Davenports Are at Dinner."*

18. Writing for Children

In a German town, a century and a half ago, the Brothers Grimm finished the first volume of one of the best sellers of all time, their collection of folk tales. "Kinder-und-Haus Maerchen" they called it, explaining that they had used the phrase "House Stories" because "these stories are an inheritance in the house."

An inheritance in the house! What more could any author wish for his books? Few attain it even in the long-lived field of children's stories—Hans Christian Andersen, Kenneth Grahame, Lewis Carroll, A. A. Milne—a handful of names. Most of us can hope only to have our books live for a decade or a little longer. I must confess that nothing has delighted me more than having the mother of a five-year-old say to me: "I grew up on your Sandy Cove stories and I can hardly wait to read them to Elaine." At least in twenty-five years of writing I have become a literary grandmother!

What makes a book for children live, even in this modest way? To begin with, the author must have a real desire to write, a story to tell. I can truthfully say that most of my books were written because I simply *had* to write them. When a plot or a set of characters comes into your mind, nagging, insisting, when you think of it as you wake in the night and can scarcely wait to start writing, then you may have a book. Enjoyment is essential to good writing, but so is hard work. There is no way of avoiding this hard work, no short cut, no detour.

The writing of children's books is not a casual or hit-or-miss affair; it is a serious and honorable profession to be approached and held to with respect. A few months ago, I saw in a writer's handbook the misleading statement: "Anyone who can write English can write a children's book." Judging by the manuscripts I see as an editor, far too many people think this is true. In one way it is; anyone can *write* a children's book, but writing is one thing and getting it published is another; having it sell more than a few copies during the first year is something else again. There is a great difference between hack work, writing to a formula (far too much of this at present), and true craftsmanship. And even an established novelist may not be successful when writing for younger readers. Children's books have a long, profitable, rewarding life *if children like them*. This is a *must*, for the books owe their continued existence to library replacements and they must be worn out by eager, seeking hands. It pleases me when I see my books on library shelves looking worn and ready to fall apart.

What background should one have to become a successful writer of children's books? To have had a full and rich childhood, its patterns and its colors, its joys and its sorrows, etched indelibly on the mind, to be able to interpret it with understanding, is the best of preparations for writing. Nostalgic remembrance, however, does not take the place of a study of

present-day children and their ways. My own preparation for writing was an exotic and colorful childhood, much reading, and a father who read aloud, not once in a while, but every day. It also includes much experience with children and with people of all ages. I am sure I could not have written a teen-age book had I not been foster-mother to a teen-age cousin during the war. I learned much from Elizabeth!

An important preparation for the writer is knowing something about children's interests at various ages. There are those who say there is no such thing as "writing for children"; it is the same as writing for adults. This is not strictly true. Certain techniques may be the same, quality should be, but the story itself cannot fail to be conditioned by the age and emotional maturity of its prospective reader. Of course, one does not self-consciously write "to an age." But there are age differences and there is a definite progression, beginning with the simple (but not easy to write) form of the picture book, where one is a miser of words and each word must count, must fit into the pattern as a fragment of mosaic fits into the whole. There one selects consciously and sets in place bright fragments that will please the small child who is in a period of sensory delight and experimentation. With very little children rhythm is important. They love the lilt of words, the repetition of a phrase. They demand a direct approach and a beginning must be as direct as in an old folk tale that sets its scene in the first sentence: "Once upon a time there was—."

Two to four is the age of the "here and now," when the everyday things of the world are touched with magic and with wonder. I have not written stories for these first listeners; it is a specialized field of which I stand in awe. I leave it to Lucy Sprague Mitchell, to Lois Lenski, to Marjorie Flack, to Margaret Wise Brown, who know how to pattern (and sometimes over-pattern) their stories so that a very little child will ask for them to be read a hundred times. Even these simple stories

have their above-average phrases, for "writing simply" does not mean writing baby-talk or the stilted phrases of a primer. In Mrs. Mitchell's "The Tickly Spider" the spider lives "deep in the grass about three buttercups away" from the little boy lying in the grass on his stomach. Margaret Wise Brown excels in the use of *sound* so important to this age. Her "Noisy" books are two- and three-year-old classics. For the above-average three-year-old there are more mind-stretching possibilities, but he will return time and again to the very simply told story.

The four-to-seven group retains the love for rhythmic phrases, words still are magic balls to be juggled, pattern is a joy, though not an essential. How often, as I have told a folk tale, I have watched children carried along on the recurring waves of it, drifting with the sheer delight of repetitive sound! And those of us who attempt to write for this age must realize that we compete with the perfect form of the folk tale. A story for this age group should be planned for storytelling; the author should always read it aloud. If it is carefully wrought it will be read countless times on library and radio story hours, as has Marcia Brown's "Stone Soup."

Many a story has had a longer life because of its possibilities for dramatization. My simple, rather naïve first picture book, "The Little Wooden Farmer," has lived eighteen years because it grew out of children's play (I saw children playing it with their wooden toys), because it has a rhythmic pattern, and children can dramatize it. They like the Farmer, too; a character that children can take to their hearts always carries a story far on its way to long life. Lois Lenski's "Mr. Small," who appears in a whole group of books, is a phenomenon; lucky the author who can think of a character as appealing. And what wouldn't I give to be able to write a book like Wanda Gág's "Millions of Cats"! It is one of our outstanding picture books. This is no mere collection of words clapped between bright covers, its shortcomings glossed over by dozens of

colored pictures. No, its pictures are sober black-and-white, but there is an entrancing Cinderella story, appealing characters, humor, surprise, and an almost unbelievable felicity in the use of words. I once heard Wanda Gág say that text and pictures "flowed along together from page to page like music," and that is exactly what they do. It is seldom that a picture book achieves being both a delight to the eye and music to the ear.

Now to consider the "middle-age" children, which happens to be the group for whom most of my books have been written. Here I am discussing mainly the realistic story of the type so successfully and charmingly done by Eleanor Estes, Kate Seredy, and a limited group of writers. It scarcely seems necessary to consider the fairy tale, for though many attempt it, few succeed, and a good fanciful story comes only once or twice in a generation. I have a healthy inferiority feeling before the work of Hans Andersen, Lewis Carroll, Kenneth Grahame, A. A. Milne, and Hugh Lofting. It would be well if writers of the "little fairy Bluebell" school shared it! How many of these fairy tales are produced by adolescent minds only to go into the scrapbasket!

At this age (under ten) the story is decidedly the thing. So is the ability to create real characters, to write simply and directly so that the still inexpert reader doesn't have to use a machete to fight his way out of a jungle of words, a tangle of unnecessary description. I do not mean using a "limited" vocabulary; there is all the difference in the world between writing simply and using a planned vocabulary. As I look back at my "Relief's Rocker," published sixteen years ago and still a favorite, it seems quite unusual in its simplicity, taking its cue from a primitive village setting, and achieving a certain charm in few words. This very simplicity is something that, having since written books for older children, it would be hard

for me to recapture. You will find it also in Eleanor Lattimore's "Little Pear."

It would seem that the so-called "teen-age" book or "junior novel" might be the easiest to write because its form most closely approaches that of the adult book. Don't be deceived! Not only are young people extremely critical, but there are limitations. The "junior novel" read by bright ten-year-olds and more immature teen-age readers is still hedged around by the absurd taboos of those who wish all reading for the young to be naïve in thought, as the young of this generation most assuredly are not. We are balancing precariously on the verge of something that could be real writing and dare not realize its possibilities because some of our critics of children's books (especially those belonging to certain religious groups) are people who have retired into a strange fastness from which they view life dimly and wish the same view on our young people.

The great problem of the writer of the "older juvenile" is to know how close to life it is permissible to go, without offending some adult watchdog. The older juvenile is, within certain limitations, a novel and should be approached as such. Indeed, some of our best junior novels are superior in craftsmanship to many adult ones.

Now as to the tools of the trade. If there is one thing that is important to a writer of *any* type of book it is observation, and a sort of grab-bag memory that tucks away impressions for future use. I've read a lot about keeping a notebook, but I'm not systematic enough for that. What I keep is a mental notebook. It was my privilege as a young writer to have as a friend Rachel Field, novelist and writer of children's books, and to see the acuteness of her observation—the way she looked at little things, noted them mentally, used them later, freshened and made new from their sojourn in her mind. Even the most ordinary happenings may be burnished to brightness in a creative mind.

The second important tool, so far as I am concerned, is visualization. To me it is absolutely essential before writing a word to see the characters, the setting, the action with perfect clarity.

If I create real children it is first of all because I love children, and know them well; and secondly, because I never write until I have seen my characters and the action of my story so clearly that they are real to me, and so to my child reader. Once the plot is carefully thought through, words seem to come readily.

Many authors find plotting a story the most difficult of all. The modern child demands, according to library statistics, "an exciting book." Too many books are plotless, and a good, well-knit plot, with sustained suspense, is something all editors look for. However, plot is by no means all, and the books that have gone on selling year in, year out, depend largely on interesting characters, and some unusual quality in the writing. A critic has said that my books have "mild plots." I have never believed that all books must have action that zips along like a rocket or suspense to keep the reader panting. My plots are simple, and for breathless action I have substituted interesting settings and (I hope) well-defined, lively characters.

Characterization is the life of the story. It is an essential. Whatever the period of the story, the characters must come alive, and all of them must be real. Don't forget their weaknesses; it is often these little things that endear them to the reader. Remember Jo in "Little Women"? If I see any growth in my own writing, it is increased ability to characterize the adults in the story as well as the children. While in a child's book interest should center on the children, parents should be allowed some emotional life of their own. Adult characters should not be puppets, though this is a common weakness with beginning writers.

Then dialogue. How many stories fall down on unconvincing

dialogue; how many writers make their children talk like stiff little automatons! To write for children one must have an ear sensitive to the way they talk. By this I do not mean the overuse of slang and modern phrases, but simply an ear for the complete freshness of children's conversation (freshness used in the sense of dew, not impudence!). Children have such an unhackneyed way of looking at their world and talking about it. A small boy having his first ride in an elevator stands ecstatically on tiptoe and exclaims: "This little house is going somewhere and I am going with it." "I have painted *a running wish!*" says a five-year-old, standing back from her easel. To be a good listener pays dividends.

Description is perhaps least important, for children characteristically skip long descriptions which are supposed to entrance them, but which really entrance only the author and a limited number of adults. As a child I read Scott, skipping the window-dressing descriptions with skill. I did not skip the descriptions in Andersen's Fairy Tales; they were a lovely part of the story, and even now some of the phrases linger in my mind. Description is most effective when it is brief, meaningful, used only as it enhances the story and makes the setting and characters real.

And—why have I left it almost to the last?—there is the God-given sense of humor, which helps tremendously, for how children love to laugh! In my mental notebook I keep a special place for amusing happenings that may be worked into stories. Nine-year-old "fan" mail nearly always refers to the fun in favorite books. Natural spontaneous humor, not "smarty" writing with one eye on adults, laughing with children, not at them—that is to a book what pepper and salt are to a good meal.

Is the field overcrowded or is there a chance for new writers? There is usually room for a book that has a new angle, an interesting setting, genuine emotion, convincing

dialogue. If there is a more rewarding occupation than writing for children, I should like to know it. By rewards, I do not mean material ones. Royalties are a necessity, of course—I make a pleasant income through my books, but I have a long list of them, and I've always held a salaried job as well. This is the ideal way to write for children, for then writing is not bread-and-butter, but an avocation filled with pleasure. Then one does not worry too much about advances and the next check, especially at the beginning, for building up a reputation as a writer may be a slow business.

No, I can't think of writing for children merely in terms of commercial return. Prizes and medals are pleasant, but the real reward is the letters that come from children. "I loved your book," "Please write some more stories about . . . ," "I liked the part where . . . ," and the very personal, "Please write some more 'Janet' stories *for me.*"

Verse

WILLIAM ROSE BENÉT *(born 1886), poet and editor, was born at Fort Hamilton, New York, of a distinguished Army family. The late Stephen Vincent Benét was his younger brother. After graduation from Yale's Sheffield Scientific School, "Bill" Benét wrote poetry as a free-lance for several years, then served as assistant editor of the* Century *and* Nation's Business *magazines. He joined the "Literary Review" of the* New York Evening Post *as associate editor in 1920; when the staff of the "Review" founded the* Saturday Review of Literature *four years later, he moved with it. He has been poetry editor of the* SRL *ever since, also contributing a weekly column, "The Phoenix Nest." Mr. Benét has published more than a dozen volumes of verse, several anthologies, a novel, and three books for children. In 1942, his "The Dust Which Is God," an autobiographical verse novel, was awarded a Pulitzer Prize.*

19. The Editor Looks at Poetry

I can remember the days when verse, simply as opposed to prose (every kind of verse being lumped together) was regarded by most magazine editors as mere "filler material." Except in the case of a few popular magazines of large circulation, that day appears to be past. And even a few of the big, popular magazines, whose editors claim no particular knowledge of or interest in poetry, have of late

years published verse that might authentically claim to be poetry.

This brief article is addressed to those who wish to write poetry, as distinguished from verse, and care to have it published in magazines. The case of light verse will not be dealt with, save to say that, naturally, the best light verse requires thorough craftsmanship, and possesses qualities that insure its permanent enjoyment by generation after generation of readers. In between this light verse and recognizable poetry there is the verse about homely matters, usually accompanied by some sort of moral preachment, that used to be popular with most of our magazines and that a few who believe in the blatant human heart-throb still elect to use or purvey. It has little in common with poetry, because it is usually written off the surface of the mind, and usually trite or banal in matter and undistinguished in manner. It is not our concern here.

There is the type of poet who does not care about publishing in periodicals. He or she may be a fine type of poet. The true poet is full of independence—or should be—and the poetry he reads in the magazines seems to him to have to conform to standards too conservative, and to be chosen by people of little discrimination. In many cases he is right. Most magazines have no regular poetry editors. Once in a while one of the editors on a periodical of scope is particularly adapted by predilection and training to judge the poetry that is submitted to it. But in general this is not so. The beginning poet, however, needs some vehicle in which his early work may appear. He needs to see it in print, because valuable—and sometimes horrid—lessons are to be learned from seeing one's first work in print. He needs to feel some contact with his potential audience. His work has not progressed far enough to warrant his submitting a manuscript to a book publisher, and, even if it has, the modern publisher, as of old, is none

too anxious to publish the unknown first work of an unknown poet, unless it so excel in merit as to make publication seem almost obligatory. Most beginning poets do not possess this excellence. Yet they must make a start. If their work begins to appear in those periodicals regarded as most selective, it helps to build their reputation.

Then, unfortunately, there is always the question of money bothering the beginning poet. If he could only start to make a little money from his work! As a matter of fact, though far down the scale of payments, magazine poetry is better remunerated in America than anywhere else. Certainly, if the magazine is a prosperous one and the standard of the poetry it publishes is high, there seems to be no reason why its poetry contributors should not be better remunerated than they are. But magazine publication operates according to the law of Supply and Demand. If an editor can purchase a poem for a small amount, because there is little demand for poetry, why, he argues, should he pay more?

Shortly before World War I in the United States certain pioneer spirits thought deeply about the fact that the poet needed an audience. In those days most magazine editors gave poetry short shrift and consigned it to filling in awkward gaps at the bottom of their pages, gaps a little too large to be filled by a type ornament and a little too small for even the briefest prose. Poetry was measured by the yardstick. A person who wrote fairly good quatrains could usually sell them, were he content with remuneration of a dollar or two per quatrain. By all their gods, swore the pioneer spirits, this desuetude of innocuous magazine verse must cease! Miss Harriet Monroe was the most effective of the pioneers, and possessed the most imagination concerning poetry as a fine art. She raised the money to launch her small periodical, *Poetry: A Magazine of Verse*, which was exclusively devoted to this one form of literary expression. Her magazine was conceived at a time

when those who have long been recognized as some of the leading poets of modern America were just beginning to write: Robert Frost, Vachel Lindsay, Edgar Lee Masters, Amy Lowell, the Imagists, Ezra Pound, and many others. Miss Monroe gathered around her in Chicago those who were interested in poetry as a vital art rather than in mere versifying for money. The success of *Poetry* in its presentation of the best poetic talent in this country is a matter of history. What is more, it managed to remunerate its contributors!

Miss Monroe was not the only one in that period to launch a poetry magazine, but the response to her magazine resulted in the birth of many other small and struggling periodicals devoted to poetry. Some of these died an early death, some survived. Today the number of small poetry magazines is fairly large, though many of them have been conducted with a discrimination so far inferior to Miss Monroe's that they are rather a hindrance than a help to one who wishes to inform himself concerning contemporary verse. Still, they are vehicles where the beginning poet may try his wings. And he has the advantage of knowing that no ulterior motive may be attributed to him, inasmuch as such magazines do not follow *Poetry's* example—they do not usually remunerate their contributors. They have a hard enough time, as it is, paying their printer's bill.

When Henry Seidel Canby began the old "Literary Review" of the *New York Evening Post* it was 1920 and postwar —the war had cut across the poetry movement in America as it did in England—and the apathy that immediately followed the war did not furnish an atmosphere in which poetry could, at first, freely breathe. Nevertheless, the editors of the "Literary Review" (all of them being especially interested in poetry) determined that the best poetry should have a place there, should be chosen without prejudice according to the best judgment of the editors, should be properly "featured,"

and that longer poems should not be banned if they seemed of outstanding merit. That policy the editors of the present *Saturday Review of Literature* have endeavored to pursue. They have given as much room to what they conceived to be the best poetry they received as the *Saturday Review*'s limitations of space would permit. They have endeavored to keep open minds in regard to new methods of writing poetry, modern experimentation, and choice of subject matter (if the subject matter of poems can be said consciously to be chosen—as, actually, it is not).

To take, then, the magazine I know best as an example of one whose editorial judgments the beginning poet faces when he submits a manuscript, what is the process of elimination, how is he—to speak colloquially—to "crash the gate"? What chance has he among so many, and why does the beastly "rejection slip" seem to happen to him so often? I shall try briefly to answer these questions. In the first place most of the poetry submitted to *The Saturday Review* passes originally across my desk. I open each particular envelope in just about the same mood toward the work I am about to read. I think I may claim by this time to have read a considerable amount of poetry in manuscript. I have been at it for years. Also I have tried to write poetry myself, and I know how hard it is.

When a manuscript comes before the editor it is going to be judged by the highest standards of which he is aware. There may be occasions when you write something entirely too long for printing. In that event you should get, if your work is liked, not a rejection slip but an explanation. Leaving that eventuality aside, first the poetry editor will look for evidences of technical ability, by which I mean a feeling for form and rhythm, a feeling for the expressiveness of words, an avoidance of the stereotyped in the manner of expressing a thought. He will look for striking phrase, precise epithet, concision within reasonable bounds, power of imagination,

and power of language. He wishes to be impressed by what you have to say and by your way of saying it. And I must say frankly that the usual editorial experience is to find but a word here, a phrase there, nothing more—often not so much.

The reason for this is that, in the bulk of poetry manuscripts submitted, the beginning poet has not taken sufficient pains with his work. He has trusted too much to what used to be called "divine afflatus," which is anything but divine when it intoxicates one who also reveals himself as an amateur at handling language and making his vocabulary work for him.

A poet needs a large vocabulary, and also a background of reading and experience that will enable him to avoid trite expression of the less intense emotions and the less interesting turns of thought. A poet needs both instinct and experience concerning the mould into which his language may be poured. A poet must have an innate sense of rhythm. It is always an advantage, and almost always a necessity, for a poet to have an underlying ability to use rhyme and regular metre perfectly if he so chooses. Then, and only then, in my opinion, should he essay free verse and other experimental methods of writing. It sometimes seems to me amazing how few of these fundamental qualifications are possessed by those who confidently launch their long envelopes toward the editorial desk. They seem to expect some metamorphosis to take place while their work is going through the mail! Otherwise it is a lack of power in them to discriminate between actual structure and jerry-building. They have no standards of comparison, and, lacking these, they believe that they are possessed of inspiration. Now a poem may be full of true inspiration, but, if it is good, it is also written by someone who knows verse thoroughly as a craft. The making of anything well is a craft, the possibilities of which must usually be learned through apprenticeship, sometimes a long and arduous one. Of course there are and always have been occasional fortunate spirits

who have seemed to be born possessed of phenomenal intuition and knowledge concerning some art. But it is just as well for the average beginner to consider himself less spectacular. I should say to him, in general terms: do not send in your work until you are sure you have wrought your material into the most effective piece of writing you can possibly make it; do not send in an envelope stuffed full of examples of your writing—that usually means that you yourself have no power of selection or self-criticism; do not think you will not get a fair deal. It will be as fair as the editor can make it.

Suppose that the editor likes your poem and recommends it to the other editors. The chances are that he is not the only arbiter of the poetry his magazine publishes. There is always a possibility that the other editors will not agree with him. There is even a possibility that they all may be mistaken in their judgment! Editors are far from infallible. Every arbiter must necessarily proceed according to his own predilections and his own temperament. So, even though your poem may have distinct merit, it may come back to you. In which case there is nothing to do but to reassure yourself of its merit, to re-examine it for possible defects—and to try again if you care to. As for rejections, most writers have accumulated a considerable number in their time. Speaking for myself, I still get them. But I recall an incident, when we were first starting the "Literary Review." One of the most eminent of American poets submitted a poem to us. Dr. Canby took exception to what he thought the ineffective wording of a certain line in this poem. He sent it back with that criticism. A little later the poet resubmitted his poem with the line changed, and said—or words to this effect—"I agree with you. The line was careless and could be improved. Thank you for pointing it out to me." Nor was this merely a weak capitulation to editorial authority, in order to get a poem published. This

particular poet was already so well established, so highly acclaimed, that publication in a magazine could hardly mean to him anything at all vital. Simply, he had the ability to criticize himself and accept criticism. He had the pride in his art, and the humility before it, of the true poet.

KATHERINE FULLERTON GEROULD *(1879-1944), novelist and short-story writer, was also one of the most gifted practitioners of that now almost vanished literary form, the personal essay. A native of Brockton, Massachusetts, Mrs. Gerould was educated at Radcliffe and taught at Bryn Mawr before her marriage in 1910 to Gordon Hall Gerould, professor of English at Princeton. Her half dozen volumes of short stories were praised by critics for their subtlety and skill. The following essay, which Mrs. Gerould originally called "Information, Please!" was written in 1934, when the casual essay, a chief literary type since the sixteenth century, was already rapidly disappearing from our publications.*

20. The Lost Art of the Essay

They tell us that the American essay is dying. We have been informed that "the pace of the time is too swift for the essayist, and the temper of the public too impatient." Nowadays, in our magazines instead of essays we find "crisp articles, blatant exposés, or statistic-laden surveys." No one, I suppose, would deny the tendency of the serious monthlies to set journalism above all else, though the derivation of the word ought perhaps to give them pause. A monthly is, strictly speaking, no place for journalism.

It should be said, however, that the official mourners have chiefly in mind the "familiar" essay, and there is some excuse

for thinking the familiar essay, at the moment, unsympathetic to the public mood. The epoch of the New Deal is not an epoch in which people are lured by praise of chimney sweeps or dissertations on roast pig. I do not, myself, particularly crave these desultory delights. But in the great days of the essay, the essay was never exclusively familiar.

The desuetude of the essay dates back to the war of 1914-1918. One of the results, among us, of that war was to send all editors passionately scurrying for "dope." People, after the conflict, found themselves immensely uninformed on a vast number of subjects that had suddenly grown important. Almost every fact—religious, social, political, economic—was, somehow or other, germane to the war or the peace. In our new planetary self-consciousness, places, people, phenomena, that had never before interested us except as adjuncts to fiction, became factually significant. Certainly we can thank the war for making the man in the street admit that some event or trend in Tripoli, Inner Mongolia, or West Australia might suddenly hit him where he lived. Travellers over the face of the globe were encouraged to bring back economic and political, rather than esthetic, impressions. Egyptian cotton, Australian radicalism, were more vivid to us than Karnak or Botany Bay. With the widening political controversies, and the growing economic distress, we became practical, to a man; and, having to watch the antipodes as carefully as our own back yards, we enlarged our vision until our eyelids hurt. The average citizen did want information—more of it, perhaps, than he had ever consciously wanted before. So, eventually, we got the spectacle of the old-line magazines forsaking their literary habit, and stuffing us, month after month, with facts, figures, propaganda, and counter-propaganda about Hitler, and the gold standard, and hogs in Kansas, and Manchukuo tariffs. The magazines became homes of journalism.

This subsidence to information alone, to writing that is so

much of and for the moment that it cannot hope to be valid for more than a moment, is not confined to American magazines. English periodicals show the same emphasis on the ephemeral. English periodicals, indeed, are less annoying only because the English write better than we do. Americans write, on the whole, rather badly. Few of us write correct English, and even when we are correct, we are apt to be drab. This is not the place to consider why Americans write badly, though that is a fascinating and fruitful subject. The point is that we do; and my friends the old-line magazines (they have all been my friends at one time or another, and I, at least, am loyal), by voluntarily declining upon journalism, have abdicated one very important part of their job. They used to be nurseries and laboratories of decent prose. Solid reputations were often made, first of all, in the serious periodicals. One long-past year, when we rented a cottage from friends, we found the walls of the study lined with large volumes—bound files of the *Atlantic*, *Harper's*, *Scribner's*, and the *Century*. We had, in those volumes, ample reading for the whole summer. Indeed, I think the shelf-space could not have been better filled. Does any private person bind and keep those magazines now, I wonder? I doubt it, unless habit in some cases is overpowering. Nothing but style, quality, literary virtue, can prolong timeliness, and make the writing of yesteryear immediately interesting. If the year 1900 is readable, and the year 1930 is not, there is a reason.

Do most magazine readers (you understand that I am not speaking of weeklies, the women's magazines, or the pulp products) really enjoy what editors are giving them? Does no large number feel, as I feel, that newspaper supplements and books hot from the press exist to document them on economic and political matters; that when they take up a magazine they want something besides Hitler and hogs? Do they never mutter "ripeness is all," and fling the magazine down unread?

Editors, remember, are not giving us journalism because they personally prefer it: they are giving us journalism because they believe we prefer it. Do their readers prefer it, is what I sincerely desire to know. If they do, the editors are justified. (And if they do, it is a blackish outlook for American letters.) I do not care to believe that readers prefer journalism until I have it from the readers themselves. I should dearly like a poll on a matter far more vitally interesting to me than the one presently to be held in the Saar. But the magazines, alas! are more likely to report to me about the Saar than about American taste.

The average man, we said, wants "dope" more than ever, and editors tend to think that he wants it exclusively. All good art is, in one sense, "dope." It conveys, that is, authentic information. But Arnold or Pater or Max Beerbohm or W. C. Brownell or Agnes Repplier conveys information in one way, and an Associated Press dispatch conveys information in quite another. While we live in this world as citizens, we must not confess to being tired of facts: but we may, respectably, be tired of facts raw, unpondered, unalchemized. One may not weary of truth, but one may weary of news. One may even want to throw Hitler and hogs into the ash can. . . . A critic once said to me, concerning a well-known expert, "X– is an excellent reporter, but he has no general ideas." No first-rate essay was ever written, I suspect, into which the writer put, if only by implication, less than his whole knowledge of life. Special information, even, is of little use unless it is accurately related to its larger context, to the course and flow of human history, unless its bearing is made known. No fact, indeed, is worth anything—even in a murder trial—without its accurate interpretation. The perfect essayist could write a good essay on Hitler or on hogs, and I should be enchanted to read it—but he has not done it yet, and I am not yet enchanted.

"When the mind of man looketh upon second causes scat-

tered, it may sometimes rest in them and go no further," said Bacon, himself no mean essay writer. "To see life steadily and see it whole," is the counsel of perfection a great Victorian essayist gave himself. That is, indeed, a counsel of perfection; it is not intellectually easy to see life steadily and see it whole. The attempt to do so, however, will prevent any writer from offering us mere unappraised facts. It will keep alive in him a sense of values so that he will try, at least, to see his facts in their due proportion and perspective; will force him to decide whether his facts are symptomatic, and, if so, of what. He will bring the past to bear on the present, he will find the right analogies and make the right syntheses. In other words, he will write an essay, not an article. I know of almost no essayist who has not at times written articles rather than essays; but if he is a good essayist, he knows the difference between the two. "I sell not bread, but yeast," says Unamuno; and the proper essay starts a process of fermentation within the reader's mind. The proper essay is not a table of facts to be committed to memory; it goes beyond facts as the writer sees them, to truth as he sees it.

We are all hedonists, I suspect; and what I resent is having (outside of bound volumes) nothing but newspapers to read. Am I facing a day when I can buy myself no pleasure for thirty-five cents? When there is no worthy printed matter to be had between three cents and two-fifty? When I must be surfeited with information and starved of knowledge? When the camera shall have displaced the brush, when everything shall be stated and nothing shall be pondered? And—this is all my question—is no one, except me, going to regret it?

JOHN R. TUNIS *(born 1889) is a prolific producer of the type of literary fare that has replaced the casual essay in American publications: fact-packed articles based upon research. Mr. Tunis was born in Boston, was graduated from Harvard, and then did sports reporting for the* New York Evening Post, *Universal Service, and the National Broadcasting Company. He has written a number of books about sports and college life for boys, including the prize-winning "The Iron Duke" (1938). His magazine articles for the most part have dealt with sports and education; his "Was College Worth While?" (1936), a study of Harvard's class of 1911 twenty-five years after graduation, attracted wide attention.*

21. There's Always Room for a Good Article

The other day I was sitting at my desk when the telephone rang. It was the editor of one of the largest magazines in the country. He wanted an article on a subject that interested me; price seven hundred and fifty dollars. There was no research necessary, and no hurry about getting it in; but I liked the idea and went to it. The piece was finished and sent away in three mornings' work. On the fifth day the editor came back with a letter congratulating me on the piece which he was using without the change of a word. A check for seven fifty was enclosed.

Two months later the article appeared. Dozens of readers wrote or wired in to the editor commending the article and asking for more of the same. Accordingly he commissioned four others at a thousand apiece. A digest magazine asked permission to reprint the article in shortened form, and offered a thousand dollars.

This is the way we wish it would happen. Now I'll show you what it's really like, this writing business.

Because that's what it is, a business. Not an exact business, like the science of making refrigerators or tractors, but a business nevertheless. The writer today, as always, one suspects, is a good business man. If he isn't, he'd better be or he'll starve. The environs of New York from Bridgeport, Connecticut, to Montauk, Long Island, are spattered with unsuccessful writers who sit waiting for that mythical editor to call them on the telephone. They aren't business men. So they eventually end by chucking the writing game and taking a job doing publicity for a soap merchant. Thus falling back into business which they had been trying to avoid.

In the outline that follows, you will trace an article from its inception as an idea to its last dying gasp when some reader digs up a two-year-old copy of the magazine in a barber shop, and pounces on the author for some mistake. Remember, writers are individualistic, they are all different. This method of writing here described happens to be my method. It is not the best way. It is not in fact the only way. All I can plead for it is that it has kept me in bread and butter and shoestrings for twenty tough years, so it can't be entirely wrong. Or wholly divorced from reality.

There are ten or a dozen steps in the fabrication of a sellable article for a magazine, and I want you to come along and help me write this particular one. I'll try to spare you as much effort as possible, but there's some work you'll just have to do.

What's the first thing a writer needs? An idea. Where shall

we find one? Ideas surround us. They come from reading, especially the newspapers. From friends. While you are shaving. Once I lost a trunk in Victoria Station in London, and on the strength of that experience wrote an article on baggage which sold to the *Saturday Evening Post.* Ideas are everywhere, provided you keep your eyes open. Crossing 5th Avenue and 42nd Street one day I found a $5 gold piece on the pavement. From that grew an idea on coins which developed into a sellable article. Ideas beget ideas. When you look for them you usually find them.

An idea that might be timely, and unless our idea is timely it's no more use than a sick headache, would be something about defense. Defense is in the air, although we have to remember that it may soon be outmoded and become offense before we can publish any story. Something about youth and defense might be timely. What's that? You got it! Earn, learn, train. Fine! An article on how young people can study in vocational schools, technical schools, and colleges, prepare for the coming struggle, and at the same time maybe earn a little cash. Maybe there's an idea right there.

What's next? The next thing is to consult that invaluable document, the *Readers' Guide*, not to be confused with the *Readers Digest* which is a magazine. In the *Readers' Guide* you'll find listed all authors and their published ideas. This publication keeps pretty well up to date. If no one has written on the subject, let's try to sell the idea. Selling ideas, like selling anything else, is not fun. It's hard work. But it is necessary and important. Here you perceive the business end of the writing game.

First, we need more information. Maybe we can get it at one of the local colleges. Probably we will have to spend a day or two in Washington visiting the Office of Education and asking questions of officials at the various educational councils who have headquarters there. On our return we have some

idea of what we will say; at least enough to see an editor. We spend a day talking over the idea, planning a possible article, trying to point it at some magazine. To do that intelligently, we go to the library, read some back numbers of this particular publication. We buy a copy and study it. I'm amazed at how many writers fail to use common sense in selling. Obviously what's suited to Magazine A would be out of place in Magazine B. Study your market carefully. Then go out and sell.

We decide on Magazine A. Calling on the telephone, we get an appointment with one of the editors. He is only the third assistant to one of the five associate editors, to be sure. Never mind, he can tell us quickly enough whether the idea is good. He'll listen. Because good ideas are none too numerous. Actually he turns out to be polite but doubtful. Their inventory is pretty full. He guesses they wouldn't be interested. So we must try elsewhere.

Magazine B is a woman's magazine, so we must slant our approach differently, and play up the woman's angles. (Let's not forget, however, that women have sons and are interested in their future.) The editor of this rag dwells in a fairy castle on the 45th floor of a skyscraper. His boudoir is done in mauves and pale modern tints, and he turns out to be amiable and agreeable. But behind the hand which covers his mouth as he leans over his desk, we can see he isn't very receptive. No, he explains, that's hardly up their street. We must try again.

Discouraged? Stick along. We may have to see four, five, six or more magazines before we get any encouragement. If it's a good idea, stay with it. Luckily we have, because Magazine C is interested. The editor would like to know more about the subject. Here! Show him that outline you have prepared which is in your pocket. It's short, about a page and

a half, and tells our story in brief. The opening paragraph reads something like this:

"He's 18 and he's worried. Next fall he is one of a million who plans to enter college. But he realizes sooner or later he may be drafted. Naturally he wants to prepare for that event. While studying he would like to train himself to be useful in national defense. Can it be done? This is a how-to-do story; explaining how young Americans can complete their education and at the same time prepare for military service."

The editor reads the outline and thinks. He folds it thoughtfully. He'd like to show it to Mr. Jones, the boss. That's all the encouragement we get. Five days later a brief note comes from him. Mr. Jones merely states that the idea sounds interesting and that he would like to have a look at the finished job. No promises. No commitments. Just that, nothing more.

Well, that's about all the encouragement we can expect, so let's get going. After all, it is now May. Most magazines make up several months in advance, and this story ought to appear before school opens, preferably in mid-August. So we haven't a moment to lose.

Now comes the dismal part, the search for material. This is the foundation, the groundwork, the basis of our finished product. If well and truly done, the article may be good. Otherwise it will certainly be slipshod and unacceptable. No one else can do this research. We must take time to do it thoroughly. That means one more visit to Washington, this time for three to five days. It means a careful study of the actual training work being done in the colleges and vocational schools in our vicinity. We must investigate the branches of the Civil Aeronautics Authority in the neighborhood, the R.O.T.C. at nearby colleges, the various courses in schools on defense work.

All this will take at least a week, ten days, perhaps two weeks of leg-work. We can't afford to skimp in either time,

money, or effort. The editor of one of the nation's largest weeklies was saying to me recently that as soon as writers start selling magazines they become careless and turn stuff out hurriedly. What he meant was that they cut down the inevitable leg-work.

We've been nearly two weeks off and on in preparing this article. Now comes the hard work, the writing. This is by no means as hard as the rewriting, unto the third and fourth version. What's that? You're sick of the thing by this time? Your enthusiasm, your creative urge is dead? Of course. Now it's plain drudgery. Stick with it. We must, if we hope to achieve a good article. Anyone can write. But the guy who is good is the man who sits rewriting until nothing is left to do.

Next comes the checking. It may even mean one more trip to Washington. We must check every fact, every name, every place, every date. Even so, we'll make mistakes. Don't worry too much if they are not essential ones. In twenty years during which I've averaged from fifty to seventy-five published articles every twelve months, I've seldom composed one barren of mistakes. But let's do our best. We should have some authority read it, too. Take it to Mr. Robinson, a Foundation official, and have him read it impartially. To our surprise, he finds a good many items to question.

The final draft is now finished, and at last sent on its way. Follows, as the movies say, a day of suspense. Yes, and then some. Luckily there's other work at hand. Proofs of a book to correct. Another article to get ready. Writers can't afford to waste time; it's all they've got. So we turn to something else while four days, then a week, then ten days go past. Be patient. Remember the editor has dozens of manuscripts on his desk. He may be having a hard time deciding about ours. Besides, he didn't ask us to send it in.

Then fifteen days later back it rolls in the long brown envelope. The letter which accompanies it is pleasant, but

just the same it hurts. Seems there wasn't any place for the article at the moment. Thanks for letting the editor see it . . . if you have any more ideas. . . .

So now what?

Now we've spent the best part of a month, one twelfth of the writer's year; about $75 in cash; and no inconsiderable amount of labor; all for nothing. Moreover this article is timely. It must be sold immediately or not at all. If we don't get rid of it soon it will be too late and our work wasted. What shall we do?

Wait a minute. Magazine K in make-up and content is a good deal like Magazine C. I'll call the editor on long distance and ask whether he'd be interested at all in such a story. Sure, I'll tell him the facts. I'll say it was prepared for Mr. Jones of C Magazine, but got crowded out. Here, hand me that telephone.

What's he say? He says that if it's as good as we say, he may be able to use it if he can find room in this issue. But only a chance. Anyhow, he'd like to see the thing, so we'll shoot it along immediately by airmail. One thing, this time we won't have to wait long to hear the verdict.

Nor do we. Two days later a wire comes. The story is acceptable, and he'll pay us $300. Not a great deal, but we'd better take it and think ourselves well out of that hole. Let's see, we spent over three weeks on this piece. To be sure, there were the proofs we corrected as well as several odd jobs. But most of the time we were working on that article. Then out of that $300 comes the expenses for the trips to Washington. Think we're overpaid?

Probably not. But there isn't much we can do about that price, because the editor has the last word. Prices for articles range all the way from a couple of thousand to a couple of dollars, depending on the article, the name of the writer, the timeliness of the subject, the way it is handled, and the

budget of the editor, among many things. Of course we could yank this piece. But if it isn't sold now it won't be sold at all. So take it and be thankful.

Several months later the article appears. Our friends congratulate us. Pay no attention to them. Only believe them when they wax indignant; that's when they tell the truth. Don't be frightened if you've stepped on someone's toes and the squawks come in. Nowadays a writer can't say it looks like rain without offending the Chamber of Commerce of Glendale, California, and drawing a letter of protest to the editor.

Now are we through with that piece? By no means. When you sell an article you sell only what are termed "first American serial rights." This means the magazine buys only the right to reproduce your article in its pages before it or a shortened version has appeared elsewhere. But there are other rights which as a rule an editor will release to you as the author on request. For instance, second serial rights may be bought by a newspaper syndicate. Or a digest magazine may wish to reprint it, condense it, and pay for the privilege.

Possibly some business firm may want to revise your article and publish it as a booklet, or in their house organ. If so, charge them money. In this way we may pick up $25 or $50 extra with no additional labor. Moreover the article may have radio possibilities. For all these you will get whatever the piece is worth to the purchaser. Sometimes a few dollars; sometimes a few hundred.

Our article had a happy if not an overprofitable ending. But maybe after all our planning, effort, and work, after the material has been gathered, after the piece is written and checked, it is turned down. It may even come back with a printed rejection slip. Such things have been known to happen. Worse still, the editor-in-chief may be taken to the hospital for an operation, and no decisions will be taken until his return. When he comes back, he suddenly recalls he gave

Smith the writer and radio commentator a go-ahead on an idea of somewhat the same tenor. So we have our trouble for nothing.

If so, be assured we are only getting what every author gets. There probably isn't any writer on earth who hasn't received rejection slips, and most of us, I'm sure, will do so until the end. I, myself, have a lusty drawer full of them, and if they come less often than they did twenty years ago, and if they are more politely couched, they still come. Still hurt, too.

What then shall we do? Charge it all to profit and loss. Put the article away in the B File, start a new idea at once. What is the B File? Literary agents all have a B File which is the graveyard of unsold manuscripts. That's gone. That's over and done with. Forget it, momentarily anyhow. Make a note, however, to bring it up next year. Maybe then we can bring it up to date, add a new angle or a new twist, and sell the thing. But now plunge full speed into something. For writing is a business and writers are not gents in ivory towers, but practical businessmen who must act the part.

The other day a lad who had just graduated from Northwestern came to see me. They come all the time, these boys, from Michigan and Yale, from Pennsylvania and Princeton. This one had been editor-in-chief of the student daily newspaper, and had his pockets full of clippings. I refused to look at them.

"Never mind the clippings, I know you can write."

"How do you know?"

"Because you have a degree from a good university. Because you were on the undergraduate newspaper. That isn't the point."

"No?" He was puzzled.

"Not at all. The point isn't whether you can write. Hundreds of folks can write. The point is whether you can take it."

Humor

RUSSELL MALONEY *when he died in 1948 at the age of thirty-eight, was one of the most successful younger American writers of humor. A native of Brookline, Massachusetts, Mr. Maloney came of a newspaper family. After his graduation from Harvard in 1932, he tutored Harvard students and contributed so many gags to* The New Yorker *that within two years he was invited to join the magazine's staff. From 1934 to 1945 Mr. Maloney penned profiles, reviewed movies, and contributed to the "Notes and Comment" page. During the latter half of his hitch at* The New Yorker, *he conducted the "Talk of the Town" department—which means that he rewrote and "tidied up" promising anecdotes that had been submitted to the magazine. At the age of thirty-five he became a free lance, contributing widely to the popular periodicals, conducting radio programs, and even trying his hand at writing musical comedy. His book, "It's Still Maloney," was published in 1946. The essay which follows was written just a few days before his death.*

22. Anything for a Laugh

Sixteen years ago—to spare you the arithmetic, it was the year known by the sinister name of 1932—a young man was lumpishly sitting, one early summer evening, on the porch of a house in Newton Centre, Massachusetts. He was brooding over the fact that, within a very few days, he was to be graduated from Harvard. He would soon need a job. A job? Ridicu-

lous! Even people who were not Harvard graduates were having difficulty getting jobs.

This young man had in his lap a copy of the *Boston Traveler*, folded to the comic page. (Don't skip any of this, it's important.) Also to be found on the comic page was a gossip column conducted by an ornament of Boston journalism named Neal O'Hara. Buried in O'Hara's column that day was an item to the effect that the *New Yorker* magazine sometimes paid contributors for jokes to be illustrated by Peter Arno, Helen Hokinson, James Thurber, and other artists in their stable.

Something stirred within the torpid brain of that young man; that very day, in the local lending library, he had overheard a little scene which seemed to be right up Miss Hokinson's alley—the lady who ran the lending library remarking, as she handed over a hefty volume to one of her clients, "Now, don't take this too literally— It's symbolic." A feeble enough situation, a mild line. Perfectly true; and yet, in that dreadful summer of 1932, it was worth seven dollars of the *New Yorker*'s money when I submitted it.

That casual set of coincidences changed my life. If Neal O'Hara had not happened to hear that the *New Yorker* bought drawing ideas from outsiders, if he had not printed it, if I had not happened to read the item, if I had not that very day happened to overhear something that I thought was funny—any single break in this fragile chain of coincidence could have had but one result. I would have had to go out and work for my living. As it was, I became a professional humorist: specifically, a gag-man. Within a year, I was earning a tidy living selling ideas for cartoonists. I lived at home for a year or so; and if there were any other gag-men in Newton Centre, Massachusetts, at that time, I did not meet them. And yet, thus isolated, I worked out all the time-honored tricks of the professional humorist.

The first joke I sold was something I had overheard and

had spontaneously laughed at. The second, and the hundred-and-second, and the thousand-and-second, were manufactured, and I didn't laugh. Well, that was all right, I suppose; after all, a lawyer doesn't chuckle over his briefs, nor a surgeon at his operating table. Surgeon, lawyer, humorist—they're all doing a job. It isn't the discovery that writing jokes is a job that hurts; it's the discovery that it's nothing *but* a job. To state it a flossier way, all writing involves technique, but humorous writing is all technique.

Further, it's a standardized technique. Any laugh-getting enterprise, from the pawky whimsies of J. M. Barrie to the sub-human antics of Abbott and Costello, is based upon one trick—the building up of an emotion, and the acceptable release of that emotion. I say "that emotion," because I don't know what it is; I suspect that it's plain, old-fashioned hostility. Not hostility against any known enemy, but hostility against the very conditions of modern life. Life today is one subtle frustration after another, and there is nobody to punch in the nose. Consider a traffic jam, for instance; who do you hate? You are caught, everybody around you is caught, you are all suffering—but who's the villain? The taxpayer goes home after a day teeming with frustration, turns on the radio, and listens to "comedy" shows. These shows are not very funny, at least not to the critic, the professionally discriminating listener, but they do offer this: undisguised hostility, open ridicule, situations of triumph and revenge as candid as a child's fantasy—in a word, it is the unmasking of the anonymous villain who has been dogging our poor little taxpayer all day long!

I never did a great deal of humorous writing outside the pattern established by the *New Yorker*. This was of course a somewhat specialized setup. There was the same old pattern of hostility, and laughter as the acceptable channel for the release of that hostility, but with one important difference—

the hostility was directed at the readers by the writers, cartoonists, and editors. The readers were put on the defensive with a barrage of the most outrageously pointless anecdotes and drawings—in the manufacture of which I was, between the years 1934 and 1945, as guilty as anybody else. Whether or not the mystification of the readers was deliberate, it was there. Probably the motive was subconscious. In any case, it was there—unmistakably.

Just for instance—some years ago, there appeared in the *New Yorker* a drawing of a snow-covered hillside, with the tracks of a single skier. There was a tree on this hillside, and the ski tracks went around it, one on one side, one on the other. It was an impossible situation, and funny only when you thought of the reader, the reader completely bamboozled by the reputation of the magazine he had bought, feebly trying to "get" the joke.

Not to "get" a joke is of course a great disgrace in our joke-ridden culture. There are two musts: to "get" a joke, to understand it; and to "take" a joke, if it is directed at oneself. No matter how bald and openly hostile a personal thrust may be, if it is cast in the form of a joke it may not be openly resented. The man in the old novel, "The Virginian," was restating this truth when he said, to a man who used a fighting epithet, "When you call me that, smile." What he meant was, "If you smile you may call me that—if it's a joke I have to take it."

Humor is a token. It hardly matters whether it's "good" or "bad" by any critical standards. Critics seem to have realized this. Critical literature, at least, contains relatively little discussion of funny writing, and that little is cautious and unproductive. There are no standards. Humor is something that makes you laugh, and the definition of it depends on you—you at a particular time and place, you under such-and-such a combination of circumstances.

I said that the writing of humor is all technique. Every

humorist makes the same discoveries. Every humorist begins by thinking himself inspired, and ends with the knowledge that he is a hack with a pitifully small bag of tricks. While I was still living in Newton Centre and selling jokes to *New Yorker* cartoonists, I evolved the method that most of them use. I made lists. Lists of places: an airport, a progressive school, a lighthouse, a saloon, a public library, and a hundred others. Lists of people: twins, baseball players, drunks, door-to-door brush salesmen, chess players, sandwich men, and the like. Lists of common expressions and trite phrases like "It never rains but it pours," "I always cry at weddings," "Another day, another dollar," "Ten per cent off for cash," "It isn't the heat, it's the humidity," "Spare the rod and spoil the child"—you have the idea by now. Now the formula for humor is merely unexpected juxtaposition. To create a drawing idea, I simply moved the lists up and down, creating different juxtapositions of people, places, and words.

For instance, on my list of expressions, I had "Thanks, I'll smoke it later," which is, of course, what a man says when you give him a cigar. On my list of places, I had a farm. Out of this purely mechanical formula—with, as the chemists say, of inspiration a trace—came a nice little drawing idea. The scene is a farmyard, where a farmer is cutting up a pig he has butchered. He hands a flank of the pig to another farmer, who says, "Thanks, I'll smoke it later." I was unable to sell this gag during the whole of my gag-writing career, and cheerfully bequeath same to any young cartoonist who thinks he may be able to get somewhere with it.

Relatively unimportant in the humor industry as we know it today, a drop of good writing in the bucket of manufactured fun, is the personal essay, which survives in the *New Yorker*. Nobody there calls it the personal essay—"casual" is the inner-circle term. This is a good word to describe the effect

that the writer and editors want to produce in the reader; it hardly fits the process by which it is produced.

Not only is the writer of a casual put through the same editorial mill as all the other contributors, reporters, poets, and critics—a mill that grinds exceeding fine and produces, after seven or eight sets of galley proof have been chewed up, a piece that can be comfortably read by a reader with no background and no powers of concentration—he must conform to a special pattern based on the age of the magazine. This is a little hard to explain, but I'll try.

Back in the late twenties, when the *New Yorker* was just making itself known, the early contributors and editors set a pattern geared to their own circumstances. Everybody was young and reckless and impoverished and lived down in the Village and drank bathtub gin. Casuals in those days were about the random antics of part-time maids, the general insecurities of light housekeeping, and the problems of thwarting hangovers and creditors. Well, time went by, the magazine prospered, and casuals changed; they involved the little problems of people who lived uptown, in elevator apartments, with at least a small balance at the bank. People in casuals had children for the first time. The hangovers diminished. Still later, the casuals began to involve living in the country (Suburbia was of course skipped). Children in casuals were away at school. The physical ailments of middle age crept in. Nobody was young or poor or irresponsible any more.

At any given time, all contributors, young or old, rich or poor, have had to conform to the current life-pattern of the editors. There is no explicit policy about this, of course. It just happens that no other kinds of casual are bought. In 1937, I referred in a casual to my "room-and-a-half" in Twelfth Street. The editors, without explanation, changed the reference to my "rooms."

The *New Yorker* is, and always has been, hospitable to

young writers who can say what the editors want them to say. At the exact moment, the young men must counterfeit fifty-year-old writing. All too soon, they will be obliged to go in for gout—and finally, of course, senility.

Jokes, and even subjects for jokes, are being used up at a hideously accelerated rate, compared to our parents' day. A comedian who would use the same monologue for fifteen years on various vaudeville circuits now needs forty such monologues a year if he's on the radio. And the number of comedians has doubled and redoubled, too. There is hardly a magazine now that doesn't use funny drawings. Even if the humorist sticks to writing under his own name instead of ghosting other people's stuff on the radio or in cartoons, he is more likely than not to find himself up against a weekly or a monthly deadline. Under this incredible, grinding pressure, moral standards among humorists have inevitably lapsed. A mild form of plagiarism is now openly tolerated among gag-men and their employers—the switch, or switcheroo. This is merely the process of taking another man's joke and changing it so that it is not immediately recognizable, as automobile thieves might put different colored paint on a hot car. A switch on my thanks-I'll-smoke-it-later joke might have a farmer shooing his small son away from the smokehouse, with the line, "No, not 'til you're twenty-one." (On second thought, that's a little too good to serve as a sample; but you get the idea.)

About the same time that the switch became respectable, gag-writers began to admit openly that they maintained gag-files. A gag-file is a gag-man's only real property, his sole estate when finally he succumbs to stomach ulcers. Filed away in one or more filing cabinets, every prosperous gag-writer has thousands of jokes. These jokes are filed under subject, with generous cross-references. My smoke-it-later gag might be filed under "Smoking," along with such gems as "Do I mind women smoking? I don't even care if they burst into flames." There

would be reference cards under "Ham," "Farmer," and "Cigar."

Every gag printed in a newspaper or magazine, spoken in a movie or play, heard over the radio or in a smoking compartment is summarized and filed away by the careful gag-writer. Then, in an emergency, it can be hauled out, given the old switcheroo, and presented as a new joke. Every retreaded gag thus turned out is in its turn noted down by the other gag-men for their gag-files. Thus, over the years, jokes have come to the same pass that the old royal families of Europe were in; they are all first cousins, and in consequence a little idiotic.

It is a sober fact that every medium for the dissemination of ideas is dominated by manufactured humor. The motto on our coinage ought to be "Anything for a laugh," with, perhaps, a tag—"and a laugh for anything." The night after the announcement that the atomic bomb had been used against the Japanese showed how far this situation had gone. There wasn't a comedy program that didn't have its A-bomb joke. The radio gag-writers had plainly asked themselves, "What will my A-bomb joke be?" Nobody had stopped to ask, "Is the A-bomb funny?"

During the years of Hitler's rise to power, our humorists kept us in theoretical gales of laughter with jokes about his mustache. For variety, there were jokes about Goebbel's lameness and Goering's corpulence. Probably there was a small minority that believed Hitler and Goebbels and Goering were not especially funny, but the average taxpayer doesn't dare speak up when he doesn't think a joke is funny. He prides himself on "being able to laugh at his troubles." He thanks his Maker for his "sense of humor." Actually, what he is rejoicing in is his lack of a decent sense of outrage.

I seriously believe that if the jokesmiths—the writers of farces, motion-picture comedies, cartoon captions, funny magazine articles, and radio scripts—were to go on strike for

a week, the consequences would be as damaging to the national economy as a coal strike. Newspapers and magazines would shrink to almost nothing, no cameras would turn in Hollywood, and the radio would stutter and fall silent. A wave of alarm would sweep the country.

Humor, the manufactured joke, has become the lubricant of modern life. In cities so crowded that it is impossible to walk the streets without actually bumping into other people, millions of people live uncomfortably, the vast majority of them working at jobs that are fantastically degrading to the human spirit. To realize for yourself how necessary a ready joke is under these conditions, just try to get through a short period of time, even twenty-four hours, without once making a joke. Jokes are the small coinage of life today, as necessary as the dime in the subway turnstile.

It is possible, walking down Third Avenue, seeing two saloons to every block, and all filled with drunken people, to reflect upon the abuses of alcohol. Everybody likes a drink now and then; but here are people who are abusing a good thing. Similarly, everybody enjoys a good laugh now and then, but a nation which clogs its arteries of communication with jokes is abusing a good thing. Yes, indeed—but why?

I can't help feeling slightly virtuous that a series of happenings quite fortuitously took me out of the humor business just before the dawn of the atomic era. I now do other work for my bread-and-butter. I am still, on occasion, screamingly funny—but on my own time, and in company that I choose. My own personal explanation for the current and growing addiction to second-hand humor is that there is a big lack in our lives, something that we are trying to replace with bum gags. Nero won himself quite a reputation by fiddling through a disaster which was, after all, parochial. There is something majestically gruesome about being a professional humorist today.

Biography

JAMES THOMAS FLEXNER *was born in New York City in 1908 and was educated at Harvard. He was a reporter for the* New York Herald Tribune *for two years, then devoted his full time to writing on American art and medicine. His books include "Doctors on Horseback" (1937), biographical sketches of early American physicians; "America's Old Masters" (1939), accounts of early artists; and a biography of William Henry Welch, written in collaboration with his father, the distinguished physician, Dr. Simon Flexner. His latest book, "First Flowers in the Wilderness" (1947), is the first volume in an extended history of American painting.*

23. Biography Is a Juggler's Art

Biography is a complicated art that combines things seemingly irreconcilable. Concerned with the depiction of personality, the biographer must be an imaginative writer; concerned with the resurrection of actual men and events, he must be a meticulous scholar. On one hand, he leans towards the technique of the novelist; on the other, towards the technique of the documentary historian. Somewhere between these two poles lies his own technique. Finding the golden mean which is most suited to his art is the fundamental problem which faces every writer of lives.

The easy way out is to go to one extreme or the other. Many

a biographer, deeply conscious of his duty as a scholar, has forgotten that he is dealing with people who once lived and thought. We may learn from his pages where a man was at a certain date and the actual physical facts of what the man was doing. Those letters and papers which the biographer considers relevant he paraphrases or quotes. And, having done this, he claims to have gone as far as a biographer may go; these are the facts, anything else is fiction. Even if his books are not vivid, they are, he insists, completely impersonal and non-partisan, entirely accurate.

We may agree at once that such books are not vivid, but are they impersonally accurate? That is open to question. Although the author has quoted the documents he has used with rigid fidelity, keeping in every misspelling and noting every omitted comma, the fact remains that he has made a selection among the many papers at his disposal. If he has written the life of a great character in history, we may be sure he has been able to quote only one document in five hundred, or a thousand. Of course, he has dwelt on the papers he considers most significant, but his judgment has depended on his own personal interpretation of his subject's career. Thus, if he considers his subject an honest man, he will regard suggestions of questionable practices in contemporary memoirs as undoubtedly inspired by jealousy and malice; it would distort the picture, he feels, to make much use of such irrelevant things. If, however, the biographer is convinced that his hero was an evil influence, these same evidences of wrongdoing will be given great weight. Admittedly this is an extreme example: the point is that no author can escape evaluating documents according to what remains, despite the most thorough scholarship, his own personal judgment.

Indeed, it may be contended that biographies made up entirely of facts, dates, and quoted source material are in one way more misleading than those in which the author permits

himself some leeway. When a writer draws his conclusions on paper instead of solely in his mind, we may recognize his point of view and take it into consideration as we read. But when an author keeps himself always in the background, we may only discover his prejudices by making a new study of the source material.

A purely factual biographer is forced by his method to present reality in an unnatural manner. Experience has trained every individual to evaluate the people he meets as living, active entities; he is not used to judging men from quoted documents. When we re-examine a packet of letters from an old friend we realize that much of the meaning lies not in the words written but between the lines. Probably factual biographers would admit this, but they would add that there is nothing to keep a reader from looking between the lines of the documents they have quoted. True, a reader can try; but he is in a much worse position to make an interpretation than is the biographer, who has studied five hundred or a thousand papers to the reader's one, and who has a much better background of knowledge of the period in which the subject lived.

Although a purely factual biography can present neither an entirely non-partisan interpretation nor a vivid picture of a living man, we must remember that the labor which goes into such a book is often extremely valuable in blazing new trails of knowledge. The expert documentarian is in his own way a worker of great ability, a Sherlock Holmes of the library shelf. Following clues as subtle as those employed by any detective of fiction, he undertakes an exciting search for the missing fact, the paper that has vanished. Back and forth across the world his magnifying glass moves; now he is rummaging in the attic of some descendant of his hero, now blowing the dust from documents in an historical society cellar. And often when he returns to the light of day at last, he is carrying carefully distilled on a packet of cards new data which may well revolu-

tionize our understanding of his subject. Such a man has made an important contribution whatever the form of the biography he writes in the end. Indeed, the book is often a secondary matter, like the article in which a scientist reports his experiments. Whether the selection he publishes from the material he has found is broad or narrow makes little difference as long as he appends a full bibliography; other writers may now follow in his footsteps, and, whatever their achievement, it will be largely dependent on his labors. Purely documentary works are source books for biographies, not biographies in themselves.

At the opposite extreme are the several schools of biographers whose only interest is in creating brilliant pictures of human beings. Not aiming at sound scholarship, they use a technique which is much closer to romance than history. Some of the most successful go so far as to make accuracy secondary to the telling of a dramatic story. Not only do they improvise conversations, not only do they juggle chronology and make up events to fill gaps in their knowledge, but, should the development of their subjects' careers not accord with their ideas of suspense and climax, they do not hesitate to change fact in a way that they believe furthers fiction. Their books are not biographies at all, but novels.

Other biographers have a respect for accuracy, but fail to undertake the labor of examining the innumerable and scattered documents which are the source material in their field. They study the obvious printed sources, making great use of previously published lives, and from the material thus culled create a new interpretation. Many of the books thus prepared have definite virtues. A fresh point of view, brilliant writing, the vivid presentation of characters who walk and breathe, an easy readability that carries the eye from page to page; these are on the credit side of the best of such works. On the debit side is a fundamental flaw in method.

As we have seen, even the most scholarly study represents in the way the material was selected a specific point of view. The romantic biographer uses several such interpretations to build up a separate interpretation, which may indeed represent an opposite approach from that which determined his source books. Let us say that he is writing about a worthy who died at the height of the Victorian era. The original biographers of such a man, themselves Victorians, would report his life according to their ideals. But our modern biographer has discarded Victorianism, so he makes fun of his subject's smugness. Yet that subject may not have been smug at all; the biographer may be dealing not with the character under discussion at all, but with the character's previous biographers. He has no way of knowing unless he himself goes back to the original sources. This again is an extreme case, but the fact remains that the biographer who relies on rewriting previous lives can create nothing but an interpretation of interpretations.

However brilliant and comprehensive were the scholars who went before him, a writer who examines the original material in his field is likely to stumble on evidence that was unimportant from the point of view of his predecessors but that will open up to him new vistas of understanding. The more original and interpretive his approach, the more valuable he will find these personal discoveries.

Facts, dates, and documents then, all the seemingly uninspiring paraphernalia of the archivist, should be a biographer's inspiration. Both the usefulness and the authority of his book will be greatly increased if he employs notes to give the source of each of his statements. Although some publishers object to references on the ground that they may scare away readers, this attitude is extremely shortsighted, even from a strictly commercial point of view. The notes can easily be

gathered in the back of the volume, designated by page and paragraph in such a manner that no numbers need appear in the text. Hardly noticed by the uninterested, these references will help the sale of the book in many ways. Serious works are often given to serious scholars for review, and the first thing a scholar does is to attempt an evaluation of source material. Furthermore, it is the experts who have a long-time interest in a field. Promotion aimed at the casual reader can keep a book in the public eye for six months or a year; after that the scholars have their innings. They push undocumented books into limbo, and keep the others alive indefinitely.

Once a biographer has mastered his original sources, his work has only begun. Now he must make a synthesis of his material similar to that a novelist makes from the observed facts of life. Before him lies the tangled record of a personality acting within a fixed period of years. He must weigh evidence and draw conclusions; he must interpret and explain. While recognizing that he cannot so far escape the limitations of the human mind as to write pure truth uninfluenced by his own personality and environment, he must nonetheless strive to do so. The broader his viewpoint, the closer he comes to a universal approach, the more valuable his book will be. There can be no possible excuse for his ever changing a fact, misquoting a document, or glossing over an event that the most non-partisan attitude of which he is capable tells him is significant. Complete intellectual honesty is perhaps the most important single attribute of the biographer.

Impartiality, however, need not imply lack of color; the best biographies carry an overtone of excitement. There has long been a tendency among some intellectuals to regard the storyteller's art as a cheap trick which appeals only to common minds. A short story, we are told, is damaged by plot; a play is not art but "box office" unless it is heavy and slow. Similarly

a biography is regarded as a serious contribution in exact proportion to its dullness. This attitude represents a pointless limiting of the artist's opportunity by taking away one of his best tools.

Drama is natural to biography because it is natural to the human mind. Since most men who have shaped events have found their careers exciting, to drain off the excitement makes the picture untrue. Indeed, if a writer feels it necessary to alter events to create suspense and climax, it usually means he has failed to grasp the inherent possibilities of his subject. Facts are stranger than fiction; the imagination of nature is more audacious than that of man. What novelist could conceive of a career like Joan of Arc's, or Lincoln's?

Since all men live in time, chronology is the only natural thread on which the events of a man's life may be strung. This does not mean that the biographer must follow his subject methodically from birth to death. Like a novelist, he may anticipate major happenings and then work back through the years to the explanations, yet the basic rhythm of time which is the rhythm of life must never be obscured. Sometimes it is necessary for clarity to group like events together even if they happened in different years, but this is a dangerous expedient which should be resorted to as little as possible. No biographies are to my mind less vivid than those made up of essay chapters, each dealing with one aspect of the hero's career and headed "The Statesman," "The Poet," "The Husband and Father."

A basic problem facing every biographer is how to sketch in the historical background without violating the time element and impeding the narrative flow. On the one hand, the writer has a personality and a career to present; on the other, he is saddled with the cultural, economic, and political events of a period. Many biographers have been defeated by this

seeming dualism. Some try to create pure character sketches, to separate a man's personality from his reaction to and his effect on his environment. Others have written erudite histories in which for chapter after chapter the hero is obscured from view by clouds of general data. Neither expedient, of course, can turn out a well-rounded book.

Whenever an artist becomes confused, perhaps the best plan is to return to the study of life. How, let us ask ourselves, does a man's environment actually impinge on his personality? Certainly not in a series of bursts which, like the explanatory chapters in a formal book, hit him from time to time with a great bulk of facts. A man's environment is an integral part of his life, a gradual revelation never separated from the subjective aspects of his personality.

Like the novelist, the biographer should keep his hero forever in the foreground; he should see the world over his hero's shoulder. Historical events appear in the book at the time when they became of significance to the person under discussion, and this automatically keys them into the story. A biographer may, of course, include facts and analyses that were beyond his subject's experience, as long as he makes it plain that he is doing so, and always keeps clearly before his readers the reference of these matters to the career and personality with which he is dealing. A type of sleight-of-hand is required.

Indeed, a biographer must be a juggler, expert at keeping many bright balls circling in the air. Fact and imagination, sober scholarship and dramatic writing, character study and sound history, a sympathetic understanding of his hero and yet a judicial lack of special pleading, these are a few of the balls that must forever fly around his head without colliding or dropping to the floor. But fortunately it is only in the rare moments when he masquerades as a critic that a practicing biographer recognizes this analogy and realizes the enormous

difficulties of his craft. When he is back in the greasy overalls of labor, he is again a simple craftsman, struggling with specific problems which he must handle as best he may. And if he sometimes wonders how his finished book will turn out, he can only hope it will be better than might be expected.

History

JAMES TRUSLOW ADAMS *(1878-1949) was the author of a number of widely read and critically acclaimed historical works, including "The Founding of New England," which won the Pulitzer Prize in 1922. A native of Brooklyn, Mr. Adams received a bachelor's degree from the Brooklyn Polytechnic Institute and a master's degree from Yale. For some years he was active in Wall Street, ultimately becoming a partner in a stock exchange firm, and an officer of corporations engaged in manufacturing, finance, and transportation. In 1919 he retired to devote all his time to writing, living alternately on a Connecticut farm and in Europe. His first two books were local histories; then he undertook a three-volume history of New England, of which the prize-winning book was one. Subsequently he wrote more than a dozen volumes surveying American history and institutions, including "The Adams Family" (1930) and "The Epic of America" (1931).*

24. My Methods as a Historian

This article is a flagrant offense against modesty. I have no illusions about occupying a niche in the Hall of Fame as a historian. I have done the best work I could in the way that pleased me best, and have had much fun out of it and some profit by luck. But I have been asked for "a highly personal statement by the writer as to his methods, his philosophy, and the rules he makes for his own game." With the natural

timidity which might be anticipated, I therefore join what appears to be a highly respectable intellectual nudist colony. Having doffed all else I trust that no reader will think that I have retained even dogmatism.

Let us start with my personal philosophy of history. In the first place I do not believe that history is in any way a science. In fact, I believe that most of what are called the "social sciences" are misnamed. Of course it is a scientific age and we all pride ourselves on looking facts in the face instead of shooting them in the back. The conscientious historian wishes to establish his particular facts with the same meticulous care for accuracy with which an astronomer or a chemist establishes his, but science means more than that to most of us these days. It means not only a body of carefully established data but of facts which can be arranged in certain patterns which we call laws, so that under these laws we can make predictions, given groupings of facts to begin with. A few, a very few, historians have attempted to establish some simple laws for history but they have not been successful as yet and rather oddly the effort appears to be suspect even among those who assert the loudest that history is a science.

There are two essential differences between history and the genuine sciences. History, as it has always been written thus far, which is the only way we know how to write it, has been personal whereas science is impersonal. To use an illustration, it would be impossible to treat coral islands scientifically if instead of comparing one type of growth with another we wrote of them only in terms of the loves, hates, acts, and careers of the individual coral "insects" whose laid-down skeletons form the island (social) structure. Moreover, the "facts" of history, numerous as they are, are meager and unverifiable to an extent unknown in science. Man has probably existed for a million years. We have somewhat unsatisfactory records going back perhaps ten thousand, but mostly

only about twenty-five hundred, for a small part of the total population. Suppose we had almost no facts for geology prior to Pericles. Again, any painstaking historian knows how difficult it is to establish certain facts, much less deductions from them, even where the evidence would seem to be ample. The historian has no blowpipe or test tube. He is a lawyer cross-examining witnesses. The astronomer with his worlds or the physicist with his atoms, does not have to take into account with his units: "All instincts immature, all purposes unsure."

Yet, if there is no real science of history as yet, there must clearly be something of a philosophy of history. I know the term is in bad repute but that does not make any difference. The thing simply must exist. The "facts" of history, in its brief span, are as innumerable as the grains of sand on a stretch of beach. In writing one of my books I went through over two thousand issues of one eighteenth century newspaper alone. In those ten or fifteen thousand pages there may have been a million "recorded facts," and that was only one item in my research for that one volume. The historian has to select, and in selecting those facts which hang together and make a pattern he must, consciously or unconsciously, have some philosophy to account for what makes some facts hang together and not others. If he believes exclusively in the economic theory of history he will concentrate on economic factors in his pattern. If he thinks religion has been a major factor he will include, stress, or concentrate on that. If he believes in "social forces" to the exclusion of "great men" he will largely ignore the latter, and so on.

My own philosophy is that unless we admit that man is a mistake and that a purely animal existence is preferable to a human one, then there has been operative through the hundreds of thousands of years of our mostly unrecorded history a gradual advance, call it progress or what you will. There is much in modern life which I loathe with the deepest loathing,

and if we pick out the high spots in the past and contrast them with the low spots of the present it is easy to make out a negative case. But taking it in the large, it seems to me that there has been a genuine advance for all classes. Most of those even at the bottom today, I think, would rather be what they are than a Neanderthal man, an Egyptian driven under the lash to build the pyramids, a Greek or Roman slave, or a serf under the feudal system. In other words, history is not meaningless. There is a thread, a movement to it, though what this force is which is developing society and the individual into something more complex, more comfortable, more intellectual, more interesting and interested, I do not know, any more than I know what happens when I put a seed in the ground and in the course of weeks have the flaming glory of a California poppy.

In general in seeking to make a pattern of any period of history I do not believe in the theory of any single or dominating cause. I do not believe in the economic or any other single theory of history. In my opinion, man is an extraordinarily complex organism, subject to all sorts of influences, impelled by all sorts of motives—religion, money, pride, ambition, love of adventure, intellectual curiosity, sexual love, hate, and others. I believe in the great man theory and at the same time in the influence of social forces even when as vague as the "great open spaces." I recall at the Peace Conference in Paris in 1918-19 a distinguished scientist saying to me after having been present at a meeting between X, Y, and Z, and seeing how certain important decisions—reverberating yet in the world—were reached, that no one need talk to him any more about "social forces" and the nullity of individuals. In my personal philosophy of history the great man and the social forces play much the same roles as in the case of individuals are played by environment and heredity. They both count.

We have not, as I have said, discovered any such laws in history as will allow us to predict the future, which is the real

test of their accuracy and validity. All the historian can do is to select some brief period and within that try to tell the narrative of events, paint a picture of the times, or explain why such and such things happened. Or he may, from the philosophical standpoint, take a longer stretch and try to follow some thread of influence through the whole; in other words, try the experiment of making a hypothesis.

Indeed he has to make these at every turn. When he decides that for a certain piece of work the price of wheat, say, may be more relevant than a trial for heresy, he is making a hypothesis. There is no way of testing this as in science. The qualities of mind required to write sound history seem to me as much akin to those of the sensitive artist as to those of the scientist. This does not mean that history should be written as fiction. The historian cannot allow himself to say "on a sunny morning in June" when he has no evidence for its having been sunny, whereas the novelist can give us blue skies or a thunderstorm. The historian must stick to his facts as he finds them, but in finding them and in weaving them together he needs not only the scientist's love of truth but delicate intuition, experience of men and affairs, and other qualities a scientist does not need in his work. Art rather than science comes into play, or what we might term an "experienced imagination." It is not chance that many of the greatest historians from Thucydides down have been men of wealth who have had opportunities of travel and mingling with the world of men in all its variety, and have themselves often been in public life or affairs. Unfortunately we cannot become wealthy by "taking courses," but I do believe that a mixing with the world is quite as important for a historian as forever poring over sources in a library. In my own case I specialized in my post-graduate work not in history but in psychology. Having then to make a living I spent thirteen years in business which taught me much of men and affairs and incidentally took me

into all but five States of the Union. My experience in the war, working in the State Department, in the Army, and for some months at the Peace Conference, also taught me much about how history is made. Then followed my self-teaching in writing, the six solid years I spent on my New England history without other occupation and without holidays. I have also been able to manage to travel and live for considerable periods in countries other than my own, in order to gain perspective and wider knowledge of human nature.

History may be written in various ways each of which serves a useful purpose. A broad division is into factual and interpretative. Of course interpretation must be based on facts, and factual narrative involves at least a minimum of interpretation, but there is a distinction between the two kinds. It is comparatively easy, provided one has industry, to amass facts from original research and arrange them on some sort of connective string. Moreover, for one who likes that sort of thing, and I do, it has a fascination, this hunting for new bits of knowledge in print or manuscript. It is also comparatively safe, for if careful one may make one's self unassailable on facts and even become the man who knows most about some little corner of history. It is, moreover, eminently useful.

But it seems to me that the ripest fruit of knowledge is to *interpret* facts, to try to find out how they are related and how they influence one another. This calls for wider background and far more concentration of thought. It is more dangerous, for one cannot prove one's interpretations by citations from "sources" and one is likely to be accused of being unscientific and "popular." I made an attempt to interpret in my "Epic of America." It was a serious effort and I had not the faintest idea it would prove a best seller. Because it is philosophical, or meant to be, it is considered in Europe as my most important book. It is the only one which, besides being published in England, has been translated into French, German, Danish,

and Swedish. This has been not because it is regarded as popular narrative but as an interpretation of America to foreigners.

In the factual division there are also varieties of writing. There is the monograph embodying research on a particular topic and intended only for scholars. There is also the longer factual narrative which may run from one to a dozen volumes, based partly on original research and partly on secondary sources carefully chosen for accuracy. These may be written with the thought of a small selected group of readers or for the general public. It seems to me that all these and possibly other forms have their use and importance, when written in the spirit of scholarship. The highbrow should not sneer at a "popular" work nor should the lowbrow do the same at what appears to him a dry-as-dust monograph.

As to what are my "rules of the game" I may say that one does not definitely at a particular point in life lay down rules and ever after abide by them. One follows some lines consciously and to some extent circumstances set others for him. In general I think a historian should try his hand at several, if not all, of the types of writing I have named. No historian is worth his salt who has not learned the nature of historical facts by hard spadework in original research. Moreover, he owes it, in a sense, to others who do it and on whose shoulders he must always heavily lean, to do his own share of this essential but financially unremunerative work. But unless he is something of a genius he will tend to have no wider views than a genealogist or an antiquarian if he does not turn his eyes at times from the minute examination of a particular topic, locality, or brief period. I have deliberately tried my hand at different sorts of work and shall continue to do so. I have written a few very short monographs, or monographic articles. My first two New England volumes were practically wholly written from the sources, and my "Provincial Society" chiefly

so. "The Adams Family" was partly interpretative and "The Epic" intended to be mainly of that type. On the other hand, "The March of Democracy" was meant to be factual narrative. I may say that the choice of type and subject may depend on circumstances. There are times when one has access to great libraries and so can do research; there are others when one has not and has to rely to a much greater extent on resources at home.

Whatever one writes I believe should be made as readable as one can make it. Unfortunately style no more than wealth comes for the seeking but to make a book as readable as possible is not striving for popularity but a duty owed to the reader, even though few of us can attain to a fine or even a good style. On the other hand, I do not believe at all in the historical or biographical schools which strive for interest and which continually pass and repass between fact and pure assumption, often without indicating to the reader where the boundary lies. No American historian has been more readable than Parkman, yet few have stood the test of a half century better than he on accuracy of fact.

Although I believe in trying different ways of writing and different approaches to our material, one gradually comes to realize that one's peculiar type of mind is perhaps better for some things than others. Nevertheless I think one ought to change and experiment. Having written books which take a big sweep through long periods, for a complete change of approach, method, and thought, I suppose I should undertake a biography which allows me ample space to consider the mind of one historical character and its stamp on the nation. If life is not to become stereotyped, it must continue to be experimental.

On the other hand I think that one should turn garnered knowledge to account and not go too far out of one's field. Interesting as I might find the life of some foreigner, I think it

would be a mistake to carry experimenting so far as to sacrifice all the background I have acquired for American topics.

In American history I believe in a completely unsectional attitude. We are today all Americans, and to adopt a provincial point of view or a sectional defence-mechanism is to invalidate the value of one's work. In this my family background has been useful to me. Settled in America since 1658, we have lived in both South and North and for four generations in foreign countries—South America, the West Indies, and various countries of Europe—for considerable intervals at a time. Strongly rooted in the American spirit I am thus not deeply entwined by connection or prejudice with any one locality, and this has been a stroke of luck for me in carrying out my theory of trying to be unbiased.

I do not go into the mechanics of how I take my notes or build up the architecture of a book. We all grow into certain methods, and what happens to suit me might be of no use to others. In any case the method differs somewhat depending on the type of work. If I am doing an article or book which can and should depend wholly upon original research among the sources, it will obviously be different from another sort in which the problem comes down more to the selection of secondary works and monographs written by others. No one, not even Channing, has ever yet succeeded in writing the entire history of the United States from primary sources, and the task has now passed beyond the realm of possibility unless science vastly extends the span of life.

As to debunking I do not believe in it simply for amusement or sensationalism. On the other hand, I believe in telling the truth about a public character when failure to do so will result in misinterpretation of important points or unfairly deprive other characters in contact with him of their proper share of praise. For example, to allow it to pass for truth that all the soldiers, officers, and congressmen with whom Washington

dealt were high-souled patriots and able men would be unduly to belittle the real achievements of Washington himself and others.

These are some of the thoughts which come to me as I envisage my own attitude concerning the writing of history. I have tried to be neither general nor dogmatic, but simply to describe a personal reaction to a personal task.

The Social Sciences

LYMAN BRYSON *(born 1888) is professor of education at Teachers College, Columbia University, and counsellor on public affairs for the Columbia Broadcasting System. Mr. Bryson was born in Valentine, Nebraska, and is an alumnus of the University of Michigan, where he took A.B. and A.M. degrees. For six years he was in newspaper work, with the* Omaha Daily Bee, *the* Omaha Daily News, *and the* Detroit Daily News. *Then he went into education, teaching at the University of Michigan and serving on the staffs of several adult education institutes in California and New Mexico before coming to Teachers College in 1934. He now appears frequently on CBS's educational programs. Mr. Bryson is the author of a volume of verse, a play, and several volumes on democracy and adult education. In this essay he offers an explanation of the differences in purpose and outlook of the "literary" writer and the "scientific" writer.*

25. Social Science Needs a Language All Its Own

I was at dinner the other night with some writers of considerable distinction. The subject of social science came into the conversation. One man, whom I much admire as a person and whose historical writing has given him a place in American literature, used the word "sociologist" as an epithet. When I was nettled and protested, he replied that Aristotle had

said all that can be said about sociology. My answer was that Aristotle's sociology was about on a par with his physics. Amid murmurs of disapprobation we went on to other subjects. The disapprobation was for me, not for Aristotle.

Thinking it over afterward and realizing again the fineness of mind and generosity of spirit of my friend, I was moved to wonder why this sort of thing was so common among "literary" people. As far as our exchange was concerned, a little after reflection showed that we were both right in a way. It is true that Aristotle was the first in Western thought to define and exemplify the approach to knowledge that we now call scientific. The Stagirite was scientific about everything, except himself, and all this in our modern sense of scientific. If I may define it, science is the description of directly or indirectly observable phenomena wherein the entities described and the terms of description are given arbitrary precision and wherein the purpose is prediction of future events. Aristotle knew the difference between science and mere thoughtful observation and he knew that any description of nature that can be used for predicting future events must have removed from it, in so far as that is possible, the color of the observer's personality. Aristotle was scientific but the science of sociology was yet to come.

Nobody, perhaps, and certainly not so wise and informed a person as my critic friend, would question the desirability or the possibility of thinking in this fashion about atoms or black-bellied fruit flies, or even perhaps about typhoid fever. But nearly any writer can give you a good many reasons why it is impossible in dealing with mobs, suicides, politics, or war.

This is no gauge of battle to prove that they are wrong. To the question, Can the study of human behavior be scientific in this fashion and to the degree that the study of other natural phenomena is scientific? the scientist's answer is, Let's try it and find out. Science is by definition a method that can be

applied to any subject matter. Polemics may be fun but they are not usually fruitful. We can leave the explicit argument on these matters to able champions of the scientific point of view, such as George A. Lundberg and Harold Lasswell. They and their colleagues can also provide us with trials at scientific thinking on social questions. But, in the meantime, the social scientists ought to be getting less carping criticism from those who could be their friends and who now seek help.

Why are writers the active enemies of social science? When one looks at the slow transformation of cultural forms the enmity is not surprising. It is natural. As a culture develops in complexity and richness, it develops also in the division of labor, and social science would have to take away from the writers part of what the writers think is their job. The attainment of scientific thinking about ourselves, as persons, is one of the last stages in the development of the division of labor. It is not yet achieved in any real degree, but we can see it coming. It will come in spite of the fact that the writers resent encroachment unconsciously and resent with explicit scorn the use of any other methods than their own in dealing with what they think are their own peculiar questions. When it does come, this division of labor, writers in the forms of literature will not have lost anything but their claims to know the only valid kinds of description of human behavior.

We can attempt to state what the division of labor might be. The distinction between artist and scientist is difficult. The social scientist, if he exists, is dealing mostly with statistical truths and with the quantitatively expressed descriptions of the behavior of ideal or highly abstract entities. As a scientist, it is his business to make elaborate generalizations, summations of probability, and the tentative laws that science needs for its work. If he is a philosophically trained scientist, he makes no claims about Truth. There is a paradox here that we have not time to discuss but it is interesting to note that the scientist, who

is generally sure in prediction, does not deal in truth but in operational definitions and tentative laws, whereas thinkers in other fields who have their chosen absolutes to work with are generally bad prophets.

The scientist, right at the beginning of his operation, disappoints and alarms the artist because both deal in words and their attitudes towards words must be quite different. Artists—or perhaps since this is written in a pseudo-scientific spirit, I ought to give my own definition of artists to match the definition of scientist. The word "artist" is here used to designate one who conveys emotion by means of design. This is the essence of fine art, to convey emotion by means of design. Obviously, most artists do a great deal more than this, conveying emotion also by direct representation and by immediate appeal to the senses and they convey, by all their inventions, much more than emotion, extra valuable baggage in ideas, judgments, and information. But his share of the labor as artist is to convey emotion.

Literature, of course, is more than the writings of the practitioners of fine art. It always has been, probably always will be a much wider category of human communication. It is a vast matrix, the undifferentiated mass of human expression by one kind of symbol system. Out of it, as the division of labor has developed, have been carved philosophy, much of religion, much of the "physical sciences," even. Homeric epics were partly divided into religion and philosophy and science by Plato. The modern social scientist is only a late comer to the ancient hunting ground. But he brings his own weapons and hunts new game.

The literary artist, in so far as he is at the moment practicing his business, uses words for their suggestiveness, their color, the wide possibilities of partial understanding. It is absurd to suppose that a communication between an artist and one of his appreciators is ever exact or ever limited to that

small area of real experience they may have in common. The artist's words are symbols to the appreciator of the appreciator's own experience and they evoke from him only what his own experience and nature provide. This is not to say that the artist does not have a meaning; on the contrary, he has many meanings, overlaid and intertwined patterns of meanings, and his words are signals from his private world to the private world of those who enjoy his work. An artist is many things to many men.

As a matter of fact, although this again is a digression, it is interesting to note that the greatest artists in words are often notably deficient in the power of abstract thought. This is not what makes them interesting but it surely does not detract from our appreciation of their writings since it is involved in their complex emotional and sensitive temperaments. Tolstoy is an excellent example and we can cite him without making invidious remarks about living novelists.

The scientist by contrast has to deal with words, not as the natural growths of man's symbolizing power, but as arbitrary symbols. So, naturally, much of the hostility of literary people for social science is expressed in criticism of what is called "jargon." Although writers are specialists in language, none of them will bother to think about the problems of terminology faced by the social scientist. In the development of any science, there comes a time when ordinary words will no longer do the work. The ordinary word has too many meanings. The scientist must have a symbol that will mean, in so far as this is possible, precisely the same thing to anyone who uses it in the scientific context. Such words are practically nonexistent in ordinary language. Ordinary language is made up of words of vague, complex, multiple, and oblique meanings. The literary artist is very seldom, if ever, interested in reducing the semantic load of his tools. He gets his effects far better by reason of multiple meanings. The social scientist cannot use, as the artist does, the

language of everyday speech for the statement of a proposition of scientific importance.

This, I would like to say in passing, is not the same thing as "writing good English." No one could well defend the heavy and ugly writing in which so much of our scientific thinking is expressed, but when the critic complains about bad writing, he is not getting at the root of the matter. It is still true that the scientist cannot put into the ordinary loose and "well understood" words a proposition that is to him of any importance.

Which shall he choose to do? Take ordinary words and give them arbitrary precision and singleness of meaning? Or invent new words? In either case, he is in trouble with the practitioners of literature. If he uses common words with special meanings, he is scolded for his presumption. If he uses newly invented words, the cry of jargon is a swelling chorus. It does him no good at all to point out that he is only following timidly in the footsteps of the scientist who deals in physical matter, in so-called physical facts.

The literary critic does not read papers in biology or physics because he does not know what the authors are talking about and he makes no claim whatever that they ought to be intelligible to him when he will not take time to learn the vocabulary. But the social scientist is dealing with exactly the same material that the literary artist claims for himself, the behavior of human beings. The artist's own statements are, in his own opinion, "true." That they cannot be true in his sense and also precise in the scientific sense is a fact that he finds distasteful. He believes in what he calls insight, not in statistics. Insight is, no doubt, a way of perception of great value and of very ancient use. Insight can give us sympathy, understanding, and, when used by an artist, can enlighten and inspire. Statistics are dull but more reliable. Jargon, or special vocabulary, can convey precisely the same meanings, for operational

purposes, to a great many different minds. Scientists can get on with common words arbitrarily defined. For example, the biologist arbitrarily uses the word "organizer." Or they can learn precise signification for a set of made words like electron, neutron, gas.

It would be more than an act of charity, indeed it would justify the literary critic's claim to special knowledge, if he would give some help to the scientist in his dilemma, instead of scolding. The social scientists who want to be scientific believe that we can have scientific description of human behavior and trustworthy predictions in the scientific sense only as we build adequate taxonomic systems for observable phenomena and symbolic systems for the manipulation of ideal and abstract entities. The problem might be solved by a curt notice to the literary critic that he should never try to read social science anyhow, any more than he tries to read the journals of genetics or molecular physics. But that, besides being impolite, would probably be useless, because literary people are quite properly interested in everything that deals with humanity. It would be far better, if he could, for him to understand how the scientist must do his work.

However, the general problem cannot be entirely solved by straightening out this matter of words. Those who claim insight will still be jealous of those who trust statistics and accumulations. This is a natural jealousy, not only because of encroachment but because we have lived so many centuries in which literature was the only wise and rational comment on human action. Aristotle knew what science was but he still put no sociological content in a scientific way. And for twenty centuries and more after Aristotle's time, all the wise, rational, and serious thinking about men and their relations with each other, about societies and their destiny, was in literature. The whole lore and treasure by which our spirits are shaped are in those poems and plays and stories.

All that the social scientists now emerging can claim is that piety does not require us to go on forever depending wholly on an institution because it has sustained us in the past, and that this applies to literary psychology and literary sociology quite as well as to other institutions. Literary psychology (the term is Santayana's, not mine) can be practiced as long as there are competent writers interested in serious speculation about the workings of the mind. Scientific psychology is becoming something quite different. We can avoid the arguments about whether Freud was scientist or poet, but we cannot get very far in a psychology that will stand the final test of trustworthy prediction if we call Racine a psychologist or expect Thorndike to be a poet.

Living men, of course, are mixed. It should not be necessary to say this but doubtless it is; all men are poets and all men are scientific but we are trying here to describe man *qua* scientist, not man *qua* man. We can well leave that to the philosophers. All we knew about mankind up to a few generations ago was in literature. What we know about mankind in the future will probably be in literature too. If important parts of this knowledge exist also in the form of scientific propositions, the divisions of labor will have been achieved.

There is one further obstacle, however, that needs to be talked about, and here the attitude of anyone seeking truth in judgments on human action is compelled to be severe with literary craftsmen. Writers themselves, and the critics and appreciators of writers, constantly make a mistake that is likely to be unfortunate for the appreciators of literature and fatal to any sound learning about human beings. The mistake is to confuse expressive power with dependable knowledge. There are easy examples of expressive power without much knowledge. Victor Hugo's talent in verse will do for one. And there are, of course, examples of powerful expression weighted with powerful thought. In English, the work of Hobbes or

Donne would serve as example. But, if one can say it without *lèse-majesté*, there are many passages in the writings of great poets, and even great philosophers, that are profoundly moving and that seem to be profoundly informing, whereas they are as false as they are beautiful. Does it make the point to say that they may be great literature in spite of being false but that by this test any scientific statement would be valueless? Expressive power, by any theory of esthetics, is part of what makes an artist great. Only in the opinions of other artists and in his own mind does it make any artist infallible.

Going back to Tolstoy, we can safely call him one of the greatest artists who ever lived. But he wrote, in his tremendously expressive way, a number of volumes that are by the standards of abstract thought mere nonsense. Evidently, a great novelist may or may not be a profound thinker. It is very hard to get artists to admit this distinction since their expressive power is their chief gift and they want as much authority in the world as they can possibly get.

It would be unreasonable to expect that artists, being self-centered and lyrically gifted people, could accept quietly the scientist's invasion. There is little comfort, perhaps, but there ought to be some in the fact that the scientist, as he becomes more and more scientific, writes necessarily more and more for a special audience. He cannot, like the artist, make his own audience. He is not working for appreciation but for operational validity.

Some of those who criticize the scientific, the abstract, and highly generalized propositions on human behavior that make science, and thus may lead to prediction and mastery, are like those who would say to a physician, "But how can your remedy be adequate or appropriate? You are not feeling the pain or the nausea. At the moment, at the very moment of this sickness, which you say you are trying to cure, it is only pain and nausea that I can feel. They are the real me. Can

you cure something else than the real me?" And the doctor wisely replies, "My chance of curing your sickness is only in the fact that I do not and cannot feel the sickness that dominates your world and your idea of yourself. It is by abstracting for observation some things about yourself that you are not now, or possibly ever, aware of, that I can get at your disease."

Poets have never liked doctors.

Scientific ideas are, of course, inventions. Ideas of value, ideas by which we live, by which life gets its meaning, are also inventions. The artist, as critic of life, is a critic of values and if he is great enough, he is creator, too. The truthfulness and honesty of his observations will be one of the things that gives him authority but his artistic authority comes from his power to express the revolt, the forward-striving, the development and the triumph of the human spirit in making good the ideals that great human beings can conceive.

In the crisis of our times, in the peril of destruction let loose, we need the artist who understands our spirit and can call out our powers to work with the scientist who can manipulate the abstract signs of observable facts about ourselves to tell us how to get what we want for tomorrow.

SAMUEL T. WILLIAMSON *was born in Augusta, Maine, in 1893. Following his graduation from Harvard in 1916, he joined the staff of the* New York Times *as a reporter and special writer for the Sunday magazine section. Mr. Williamson was one of the founders and the first editor of* Newsweek *magazine. After five years' service, he left* Newsweek *in 1938 to become a magazine consultant and free-lance writer. He is the author of a biography of Frank Gannett (1940) and co-author of "Trends in Collective Bargaining" (1945). In a sense, Mr. Williamson's essay is a rebuttal to the preceding article by Lyman Bryson.*

26. How To Write like a Social Scientist

During my years as an editor, I have seen probably hundreds of job applicants who were either just out of college or in their senior years. All wanted "to write." Many brought letters from their teachers. But I do not recall one letter announcing that its bearer could write what he wished to say with clarity and directness, with economy of words, and with pleasing variety of sentence structure.

Most of these young men and women could not write plain English. Apparently their noses had not been rubbed in the drudgery of putting one simple, well-chosen word behind the other. If this was true of teachers' pets, what about the rest?

What about those going into business and industry? Or those going into professions? What about those who remain at college—first for a Master of Arts degree, then an instructorship combined with work for a Ph.D., then perhaps an assistant professorship, next a full professorship and finally, as an academic crown of laurel, appointment as head of a department or as dean of a faculty?

Certainly, faculty members of a front-rank university should be better able to express themselves than those they teach. Assume that those in the English department have this ability: Can the same be said of the social scientists—economists, sociologists, and authorities on government? We need today as we never needed so urgently before all the understanding they can give us of problems of earning a living, caring for our fellows, and governing ourselves. Too many of them, I find, can't write as well as their students.

I am still convalescing from overexposure some time ago to products of the academic mind. One of the foundations engaged me to edit the manuscripts of a socio-economic research report designed for the thoughtful citizen as well as for the specialist. My expectations were not high—no deathless prose, merely a sturdy, no-nonsense report of explorers into the wilderness of statistics and half-known fact. I knew from experience that economic necessity compels many a professional writer to be a cream-skimmer and a gatherer of easily obtainable material; for unless his publisher will stand the extra cost, he cannot afford the exhaustive investigation which endowed research makes possible. Although I did not expect fine writing from a trained, professional researcher, I did assume that a careful fact-finder would write carefully.

And so, anticipating no literary treat, I plunged into the forest of words of my first manuscript. My weapons were a sturdy eraser and several batteries of sharpened pencils. My armor was a thesaurus. And if I should become lost, a near-by

public library was a landmark, and the "Encyclopedia of Social Sciences" on its reference shelves was an ever-ready guide.

Instead of big trees, I found underbrush. Cutting through involved, lumbering sentences was bad enough, but the real chore was removal of the burdocks of excess verbiage which clung to the manuscript. Nothing was big or large; in my author's lexicon, it was "substantial." When he meant "much," he wrote "to a substantially high degree." If some event took place in the early 1920's, he put it "in the early part of the decade of the twenties." And instead of "that depends," my author wrote, "any answer to this question must bear in mind certain peculiar characteristics of the industry."

So it went for 30,000 words. The pile of verbal burdocks grew—sometimes twelve words from a twenty-word sentence. The shortened version of 20,000 words was perhaps no more thrilling than the original report; but it was terser and crisper. It took less time to read and it could be understood quicker. That was all I could do. As S. S. McClure once said to me, "An editor can improve a manuscript, but he cannot put in what isn't there."

I did not know the author I was editing; after what I did to his copy, it may be just as well that we have not met. Aside from his cat-chasing-its-own-tail verbosity, he was a competent enough workman. Apparently he is well thought of. He has his doctorate, he is a trained researcher and a pupil of an eminent professor. He has held a number of fellowships and he has performed competently several jobs of economic research. But, after this long academic preparation for what was to be a lifework, it is a mystery why so little attention was given to acquiring the use of simple English.

Later, when I encountered other manuscripts, I found I had been too hard on this promising Ph.D. Tone-deaf as he was to words, his report was a lighthouse of clarity among the

chapters turned in by his so-called academic betters. These brethren—and sister'n—who contributed the remainder of the foundation's study were professors and assistant professors in our foremost colleges and universities. The names of one or two are occasionally in newspaper headlines. All of them had, as the professorial term has it, "published."

Anyone who edits copy, regardless of whether it is good or bad, discovers in a manuscript certain pet phrases, little quirks of style and other individual traits of its author. But in the series I edited, all twenty reports read alike. Their words would be found in any English dictionary, grammar was beyond criticism, but long passages in these reports demanded not editing but actual translation. For hours at a time, I floundered in brier patches like this: "In eliminating wage changes due to purely transitory conditions, collective bargaining has eliminated one of the important causes of industrial conflict, for changes under such conditions are almost always followed by a reaction when normal conditions appear."

I am not picking on my little group of social scientists. They are merely members of a caste; they are so used to taking in each other's literary washing that it has become a habit for them to clothe their thoughts in the same smothering verbal garments. Nor are they any worse than most of their colleagues, for example:

> In the long run, developments in transportation, housing, optimum size of plant, etc., might tend to induce an industrial and demographic pattern similar to the one that consciousness of vulnerability would dictate. Such a tendency might be advanced by public persuasion and governmental inducement, and advanced more effectively if the causes of urbanization had been carefully studied.

Such pedantic Choctaw may be all right as a sort of code language or shorthand of social science to circulate among

initiates, but its perpetrators have no right to impose it on others. The tragedy is that its users appear to be under the impression that it is good English usage.

Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do! There once was a time when everyday folk spoke one language, and learned men wrote another. It was called the Dark Ages. The world is in such a state that we may return to the Dark Ages if we do not acquire wisdom. If social scientists have answers to our problems yet feel under no obligation to make themselves understood, then we laymen must learn their language. This may take some practice, but practice should become perfect by following six simple rules of the guild of social science writers. Examples which I give are sound and well tested; they come from manuscripts I edited.

RULE 1. *Never use a short word when you can think of a long one.* Never say "now" but "currently." It is not "soon" but "presently." You did not have "enough" but a "sufficiency." Never do you come to the "end" but to the "termination." This rule is basic.

RULE 2. *Never use one word when you can use two or more.* Eschew "probably." Write, "it is probable," and raise this to "it is not improbable." Then you'll be able to parlay "probably" into "available evidence would tend to indicate that it is not unreasonable to suppose."

RULE 3. *Put one-syllable thought into polysyllabic terms.* Instead of observing that a work force might be bigger and better, write, "In addition to quantitative enlargement, it is not improbable that there is need also for qualitative improvement in the personnel of the service." If you have discovered that musicians out of practice can't hold jobs, report that "the fact of rapid deterioration of musical skill when not in use soon converts the employed into the unemployable." Resist the impulse to say that much men's clothing is machine made. Put it thus: "Nearly all operations in the industry lend

themselves to performance by machine, and all grades of men's clothing sold in significant quantity involve a very substantial amount of machine work."

RULE 4. *Put the obvious in terms of the unintelligible.* When you write that "the product of the activity of janitors is expended in the identical locality in which that activity takes place," your lay reader is in for a time of it. After an hour's puzzlement, he may conclude that janitors' sweepings are thrown on the town dump. See what you can do with this: "Each article sent to the cleaner is handled separately." You become a member of the guild in good standing if you put it like this: "Within the cleaning plant proper the business of the industry involves several well-defined processes, which, from the economic point of view, may be characterized simply by saying that most of them require separate handling of each individual garment or piece of material to be cleaned."

RULE 5. *Announce what you are going to say before you say it.* This pitcher's wind-up technique before hurling towards —not at—home plate has two varieties. First is the quick wind-up: "In the following sections the policies of the administration will be considered." Then you become strong enough for the contortionist wind-up: "Perhaps more important, therefore, than the question of what standards are in a particular case, there are the questions of the extent of observance of these standards and the methods of their enforcement." Also, you can play with reversing Rule 5 and *say what you have said after you have said it.*

RULE 6. *Defend your style as "scientific."* Look down on—not up to—clear, simple English. Sneer at it as "popular." Scorn it as "journalistic." Explain your failure to put more mental sweat into your writing on the ground that "the social scientists who want to be scientific believe that we can have scientific description of human behavior and trustworthy predictions in the scientific sense only as we build adequate

taxonomic systems for observable phenomena and symbolic systems for the manipulation of ideal and abstract entities." For this explanation I am indebted to Lyman Bryson in his essay, "Social Science Needs a Language All Its Own." Standing on ground considerably of his own choosing, Mr. Bryson argued against judging social science writing by literary standards.

Social scientists are not criticized because they are not literary artists. The trouble with social science does not lie in its special vocabulary. Those words are doubtless chosen with great care. The trouble is that too few social scientists take enough care with words outside their special vocabularies.

It is not too much to expect that teachers should be more competent in the art of explanation than those they teach. Teachers of social sciences diligently try to acquire knowledge; too few of them exert themselves enough to impart it intelligently.

Too long has this been excused as "the academic mind." It should be called by what it is: intellectual laziness and grubby-mindedness.

The Natural Sciences

WILLIAM L. LAURENCE *one of the leading American reporters of science news, was born in Lithuania in 1888. Mr. Laurence came to the United States at the age of seventeen, studied at Harvard College and Harvard Law School, and received the LL.B. degree from Boston University in 1925. After some years as a free-lance writer, he joined the staff of the* New York World *as a general reporter. He has been a science news reporter for the* New York Times *since 1930. In 1939-40 he served as president of the National Association of Science Writers. Mr. Laurence has won two Pulitzer Prizes—the first in 1937 for reporting the Harvard Tercentenary Conference of Arts and Sciences, the second in 1946 for his eye-witness account of the bombing of Nagasaki and ten other articles on the development, production, and significance of the atom bomb. His report of the Nagasaki bombing was released to the press by the War Department. The eleven articles he wrote about the bomb form the basis of Mr. Laurence's book, "Dawn Over Zero" (1946).*

27. How To Know Nothing about Everything

A few years before Hiroshima the science editor for one of our great metropolitan newspapers informed his editor that his regular article for the following Sunday would deal with the subject of cosmic rays.

"Cosmic rays," said the editor with a tone of finality, "are out!"

"What's wrong with cosmic rays?" he was asked.

"The publisher doesn't like cosmic rays, and neither do I. Furthermore, let me tell you, I don't believe in atoms and have but slight faith in molecules."

This example was not unique in the years preceding nuclear fission. Another science editor, on another metropolitan newspaper of large circulation, offered his editor a story about an important development in the use of the female sex hormone for relieving the physical and mental distress that all too frequently accompanies the period of the menopause. It should have been a page-one story in any man's newspaper, for it promised relief from suffering not only to millions of women in one of the crucial periods of their lives but also to the other members of the family whose peace of mind is inevitably perturbed. The busy, harassed editor, however, dismissed the subject with a shrug. He had no more faith in hormones than the other editor had in cosmic rays and atoms. They simply did not fit into the preconceived ideas of what constituted "news."

By a strange irony, the editor who didn't believe in hormones came to respect them only a few weeks later when they unexpectedly entered his own home and made life much pleasanter for him and his family. It appeared that Mrs. Editor had become a new woman ever since her physician had prescribed a bottle of small pills for which he had paid an exorbitant sum. Those little pills had certainly worked a miracle. He no longer dreaded coming home after a harrowing day in the office. "I'll take a column on this female hormone stuff you once offered me," he told his astonished reporter. This time it made page one.

Since Hiroshima there is no longer an editor anywhere who does not believe in atoms. In fact, judging by some of the stuff that gets into print, editors have become almost too gullible. (Along with the general public, for example, most of them are

still ready to believe, despite universal scientific assurances to the contrary, that the explosion of an atomic bomb presents the danger of starting a chain reaction in the atmosphere.) Nor do they shudder any more at the mention of cosmic rays, once you make it clear in the lead paragraphs that they hold an important key to the forces within the atom. They have developed a wholesome respect for neutrons, both of the slow and fast varieties, and take protons, deuterons, and alpha particles, gamma rays and beta rays, even mesons, in their stride. If there is any grumbling, it is on the part of the hapless copy reader who cannot fit in such outlandish words as synchrotron, synchrocyclotron or linear accelerator into his headline, but no doubt he will learn to abbreviate them just as he learned to shorten sodium sulfathiazole, sulfapyridine, sulfanilamide, etc., into the now familiar "sulfa" drugs.

Nevertheless, the problem of educating the editor to the importance of science news, and to the fact that science news is the most significant news of our times, shaping and profoundly affecting all other events filling the pages of our newspapers, still largely remains. The relative amount of space devoted to science news, as compared with other subjects, such as politics, business, finance, and sports, is still very small. This can hardly be blamed entirely upon the editor, who judges news by what he believes his readers are most interested in. If his readers are more interested in baseball than in nuclear physics or the quantum theory, who is he to force an unwanted pill down their throats? After all, the editor, himself likely as not an ardent baseball fan, wants to produce a newspaper with the most interesting reading matter for the majority of his readers, the circle of which he aims not only to hold but to increase. "Quantum theory, did you say? Sorry, we are very tight on space tonight. Forget about it!"

Here is where one of the major problems of the science

reporter comes in. He not only has to have at least an elementary understanding of what the quantum theory and similar abstruse subjects are all about; he must be able to translate the jargon of the scientists into ordinary language understandable to the layman. But mere translation is not enough. The translation must not only be accurate as to the facts, it must also be told in a manner to arouse the interest of the reader. It must, in other words, compete with the average run of news of the day and claim attention on its own merits as a news story. Furthermore, he must be prepared to do it under the pressure of the deadline.

Of course, not all science stories deal with relativity or the quantum. In fact, most science reporters shy away from these and similar highly abstruse subjects, not only because their own understanding of them is hazy, to say the least, but because they also know the reader resistance against them is too great at present to be overcome without the greatest difficulty. As a result some of the most fascinating explorations into the nature of the cosmos go largely unrecorded in our daily press and are only rarely touched upon in popular periodicals and other literature accessible to the average reader. Yet the quantum and relativity theories have profoundly affected the lives of everyone now living and will play an even more important role in the lives of future generations, for the very simple reason, realized even today by only a small minority, that these two theories not only brought about the greatest intellectual revolution in modern times, if not in all recorded history, but also were responsible for the advent of the atomic age.

Be that as it may, the average newspaper editor and science reporter is satisfied to deal with more practical subjects, of more immediate and direct interest to the daily lives of the average newspaper reader—new atom-smashing machines, new telescopes, new chemicals, new drugs, new hormones and

vitamins, new approaches to the treatment of disease, animal experiments on nutrition, the results of research on cancer, heart disease, high blood pressure, and many other ills that plague mankind, and the latest advances in physiology, biology, chemistry, nuclear physics, astronomy, zoology, botany, etc., not to mention the many specialties in which most of the major branches are now being subdivided.

It can be seen from this enumeration that the science reporter is confronted with the impossible task of having at least a smattering of knowledge, or rather, of ignorance, over the entire range of the physical and biological sciences and the splinter groups that have grown, and are still growing, out of them. It is by now a truism that a specialist is one who knows "more and more about less and less until he knows everything about nothing." The science reporter, on the other hand, is the exact opposite. He knows, or presumes to know, less and less about more and more until he knows nothing about everything. These two extremes, and the points in between, illustrate the dilemma of both the scientist and the popularizer of science. Whereas on the one hand the field of the scientist becomes narrower and narrower, until there is hardly any contact between specialists even in the same general field, the field of the science reporter at the same time becomes correspondingly wider and wider. Within the last few years, to cite but a few examples, the specialties of virology (study of viruses), enzymology, cytology, cytogenetics, and protein chemistry were born as independent subdivisions of bacteriology, biochemistry, and genetics. Their importance may be gauged by the fact that virology may hold the answer to the cure or prevention of infantile paralysis and many other serious virus diseases, not to mention the common cold, while any one of the others, singly or in combination, may provide the key to the cure or prevention of cancer, and to some of the basic processes of life.

Obviously, the science reporter cannot be a walking encyclopedia. He must have, of course, to start with a general elementary knowledge of physics, chemistry, and biology, obtained through elementary courses in college and supplemented by reading authoritative books on the subject. With this start, his job is very much like the job of any other good reporter in other fields, such as politics, finance, and business, namely, to have a thorough familiarity with the authentic sources of the news and to establish intimate and mutually trustworthy contacts with these sources. The main difference here is that the sources and the contacts are by necessity much more widely scattered than they are in other fields. More important still, the possessors of the first-hand knowledge are generally not very articulate in conveying what they know to the non-expert in simple terminology.

I remember the first time I attended a presentation by J. Robert Oppenheimer. Even physicists not too well versed in higher mathematics have difficulty in following him and it did not take me long to realize that I was in deep waters and way beyond my swimming range. I had taken pains, however, to take a seat next to a well-known physicist who also happened to be one of the most articulate in the field. Every once in a while he would give me a hint as to what "Oppie" (as I came to know him later at Los Alamos) was driving at. Armed with this smattering of knowledge, I approached the speaker for further elucidation as soon as he had finished.

His first reaction, when he learned who I was and what I wanted, was explosive. "These mathematical symbols," he expostulated, "have no meaning in terms of words. I could not possibly translate what they mean in any language other than mathematics."

"Maybe I could tell you what they mean to me and you can tell me whether or not I am on the right track." Whereupon I

began spinning for him a yarn based on the snatches of information gathered during his talk.

"That's very interesting," said "Oppie," "go on, let me hear the rest of it."

The upshot of it was that, as I kept on talking, he would stop me to make corrections, and to fill in blank spaces. Before I was finished I had the material for an article that appeared the following day on page one of *The New York Times*, much to my own as well as "Oppie's" surprise. That was more than fourteen years ago, and I believe it was the first time "Oppie" had been mentioned in any news story, certainly the only time on page one until the day after Hiroshima.

Why did I select "Oppie" in the first place? This brings up one of the most important problems facing a conscientious reporter of science—namely, the problem of selectivity. Probably the major sources of science news are the reports on research presented at the annual or semi-annual conventions of the major national scientific societies, such as the American Chemical Society, the National Academy of Sciences, the American Physical Society, the Federation of Experimental Biologists, and many others. A few of these, notably the American Chemical Society, maintain an excellent news service which provides abstracts and frequently full texts of most of the important papers presented at the meeting. Others provide a service that is very sketchy or none at all. The latter present the science reporter with a major headache. Scientific meetings are no longer the simple gatherings they used to be. They have literally become many-ringed circuses performing simultaneously in different arenas, depending on the number of sections in which the program is divided. As many as a thousand individual reports, for example, are presented at the annual winter meeting of the American Association for the Advancement of Science in a period of five days, and this in

addition to several hundred scientific exhibits, scores of which may represent work of outstanding importance. The same is true to a lesser extent with other national scientific meetings. Confronted with the ever-present problem of space limitations, not to mention the even greater problem of time, the science reporter must practice selectivity to the utmost of his ability, experience, and judgment, always haunted by the doubt that he may have missed something of high significance and by the worry of being scooped by his rival newspaper.

Speaking of scoops reminds me of the time when I picked up a New York evening newspaper and read to my amazement a front-page six-column headline: "Man Descended from Horse, Scientist Finds." As the startling news had emanated from the same meeting I was then covering, I naturally was curious to check on how I happened to miss such a find. It turned out that a Chinese scholar had presented a paper before the history of science section of the AAAS in which he described a Chinese theory of evolution of circa 2000 B.C. I could not resist the temptation of sending a wire to the editor of that newspaper inquiring "from which end of the horse?"

The problem of selectivity is largely complicated by the fact that no one, not even the scientific investigator himself, can generally tell where his work is going to lead, and most of them even resent being asked such a question. The pure scientist, who blazes the trail for the applied scientist, can never be sure what practical results, if any, his search will bring. He is seeking knowledge per se, and to him even negative results are important since they tell him to start on a new track. Faraday never dreamed that his work on electricity and magnetism would lead to the dynamo and the age of electricity, and when asked what his crude apparatus demonstrating the principle of the dynamo was good for he could only ask in return: "What good is a baby?" Nor did James Clerk Maxwell have the faintest notion that his mathematical

equations which revealed the existence of electromagnetic waves would lead to radio and television. And, what's more, it didn't matter to him. The sheer joy of the creation of intellectual beauty through mathematical symbols was just as spiritually satisfying to him as was the composition of the Seventh Symphony to Beethoven.

Nevertheless, it is not beyond the realm of possibility that had a science reporter of sufficient imagination and background been around in the days of a Faraday and a Maxwell, a Jules Verne or an H. G. Wells, for example, they might have succeeded, by a process of Socratic midwifery, to conjure up the dim outlines of a future that would have made fascinating reading for their contemporaries. And, who knows, such reading might have speeded up the coming of that future, with consequent profound changes on the entire course of history during the past fateful century.

Speaking for myself, it is the ever-present possibility of some day running into a Faraday or a Maxwell that constitutes for me the greatest challenge as well as the greatest promise of inner satisfaction. Conversely, it is the ever-present worry about failing to recognize them if, and when, I should meet them, that keeps me always on my toes and frequently haunts me like a nightmare. For while Faradays and Maxwells and Einsteins and Plancks are not born every year, it is nonetheless certain that their kind must be reborn from time to time, and it is, to my mind, one of the major functions of the alert science reporter to be ever on the lookout for them.

Superficially it may appear that outstanding scientific discoveries are in themselves so self-evident as to hit anyone with ordinary common sense square in the eye. Take, for example, the discovery of penicillin. In retrospect that would seem to be a natural for any reporter—a miracle drug, if there ever was one. That, however, is true only in retrospect.

The first paper on penicillin ever to be presented in this country was a short ten-minute preliminary report given before a meeting of a small select medical society (the Association of American Physicians) early in May 1941. It reported largely on experiments on mice and on only three or four human patients. The total quantity of penicillin available then was a few milligrams, just enough to carry on more experiments with mice. The outlook for its large-scale production in the near future, if ever, was practically nil.

This kind of situation always confronts me with a formidable problem. Mice aren't men, and a few preliminary experiments on mice, as all scientists will tell you, are far from justifying any conclusion that the results will also be similar in humans. Emphasizing this fact in the newspaper report seems to be useless, for the desperate human patient dying of some incurable disease, or his family, flatly refuses to accept any such explanation. In the case of penicillin, and indeed in the case of most new drugs, the problem is further complicated by the unavailability of the material. If a writer has a conscience—and I confess to having one—he cannot help visualizing in his mind's eye, as he sits by his typewriter dashing off his report on preliminary results gained largely in animal experiments, the thousands of victims of a particular disease, and the families of the victims, in whose hearts he will kindle a spark of false hope. It does not do the patient dying of a terrible infectious disease, or his family, or his physician, any good to read one day in the newspaper that a new drug, or a new method, has been developed that cures mice of his particular affliction, but is, alas, still unavailable for him. This conflict between one's obligation to the public as a disseminator of information, on the one hand, and one's conscience as a human being not to inflict unnecessary suffering on helpless human beings already sorely afflicted, and most of them doomed to die, becomes particularly acute in reporting

any developments in the field of cancer research. Speaking again for myself, I try my best to resolve this dichotomy by sticking scrupulously to facts and emphasizing to the utmost that the report in question is not yet, and may never be, applicable to human disease.

The story of penicillin may also serve as a striking illustration of what is to my mind the principal function of the science writer and the service he can perform for contemporary civilization. It is the reduction of the lag between discovery and application, with all that this implies for modern society and for the future of man.

Penicillin was originally discovered by Dr. (now Sir) Alexander Fleming of London in 1928, but the report on it in a British biological journal collected dust for more than a dozen years, and, for all we know, would still have been collecting dust were it not for the urgent need for such an anti-bacterial substance brought about by the most cataclysmic war in history. I shall never forget the remarks of Sir Alexander on one of the numerous occasions when he acknowledged an honor bestowed on him for his epoch-making discovery. "On such occasions," he remarked rather wistfully, "I cannot help thinking of the thousands now dead who would still be alive had interest in penicillin been aroused when I first discovered it in 1928."

The science writer is, of course, not alone to bear the responsibility for "the thousands now dead." Nevertheless, he must accept a large share of the blame. Had the newspapers reported on penicillin when it was first discovered, who knows but that somebody, somewhere, might have become sufficiently interested to carry on further work on it and thus make it available years before World War II? Possibly Sir Alexander himself must accept a share of the blame for not calling it to the attention of some responsible British newspaperman. But this would have been contrary to the rather rigid code of the

scientists. Happily, the rigidity of this code is being relaxed somewhat, and as the science writer grows to recognize more fully his responsibility to society and convinces scientists of this sense of responsibility on his part, the more cordial will become the relations between scientists and science writers and the greater the promise for the reduction of the lag between discovery and application.

Science writing is still in its infancy. It has developed largely during the past twenty years in a helter-skelter fashion. The time has long been ripe for our universities and schools of journalism to make science writing an important part of their curriculum. An enlightened and consecrated corps of science writers can play a highly important role in a democratic society in bringing science—and its vast social implications—closer to the people and the people closer to science, with inestimable benefits to both. The well-trained and socially-conscious science writer could serve as the true descendant of Prometheus, bringing down the fire from the scientific Olympus to the people in the valley below with the full consent and cooperation of the Olympians.

Literary Criticism

HENRY SEIDEL CANBY *For some information concerning Dr. Canby's life and career in American letters, see the biographical note preceding his article "Why Write?" on page 3.*

28. An Exacting Art

For the hundredth time we are moved to wonder what it is that inclines so many persons to book reviewing. Is it mere desire for self-expression? Is it the ability to turn a facile phrase or force a glittering paradox? Is it hot convictions or passionately held prejudices? Is it an egotistical urge to speak out in meeting? Or is it a belief that criticism is easy, requires no special equipment, and is, if not lucrative, at least respectable and, today, respected? All editorial offices know how frequent is the literary aspirant whose whole preparation for the work of passing judgment on the writings of others is a course or two in English at college, a general interest in books, and a large faith in his ability to "handle anything." He is the reviewer who will write around the Einstein theory with the same complacence that he will avoid giving away the point in a detective story and tackle a history of the crusades with as much self-confidence as the chronicle of a motor trip across the Sahara. And he is, curiously enough, the man who is sometimes of considerable value to journalism if not to criticism. For he serves for the paper that is professedly writing

for the masses much as do the lay critics whom we understand the Hollywood authorities call in to sit in judgment on the scenarios of highly paid writers—he is the index to public taste and the exponent of it. But surely he is not the critic.

For criticism is an exacting art. It demands first and foremost an intellectual honesty that never allows feeling to warp reason and that recognizes knowledge as the touchstone of judgment. It implies that queer paradox of the mind that to be open must be shut—shut to prejudice, shut to the clamor of propagandists and slanderers, shut to the insistence of faddists and denunciators. It requires taste, and sympathy, and understanding, and an immense and constant interest in the present as well as a wide acquaintance with the past. It demands the ability not only to analyze but to interpret, not only to expound but to exhilarate. It presupposes a decent respect to the established sanctions and an attitude of watchful waiting towards the experimental. It is zealous, and jealous, and catholic all at the same time.

Criticism that is worth its salt results not from reading but from thinking. And by thinking we would not be understood to mean merely a deliberate effort at ratiocination directed toward the interpretation of the volume in hand, but a long habit of reflection that weaves life and literature into relation and that affords a basis for understanding and judgment. The best criticism should have the masculine quality of virility, the feminine trait of intuition. For it must be robust if it is not to be betrayed by externals of sentiment and style, and it must have insight if it is to find more than surface values. What happens when really constructive criticism is written is that a book has acted as an explosive to a long-laid train of thought. All that the critic has felt and divined about life and living, all the standards he has established through loving study of "the best that has been thought and said in the world," becomes the background against which he projects and the

means through which he evaluates the volume he is criticizing. The richer the personality of the critic, and the greater his stores of knowledge, the more revealing will be his comment, the more understanding his appraisal of the author's intention and achievement.

The primary object of all writing about books, we take it, is to give them currency. For the best book in the world is worth nothing at all if it never finds a reader. Merely to analyze a book is for the critic to fulfil but a portion of his task. Properly to present it he must distil its spirit as well as display its parts. A difficult undertaking, indeed, and one that demands high abilities, not a mere smattering of knowledge and an ardor to write.

WILLIAM SOSKIN *(born 1899) is a New York book publisher. A native of New York City, he received an A.B. from Columbia and studied at the Columbia Law School before embarking upon a journalistic career that included service on the* Chicago Evening Post, New York Evening Mail, New York Call, New York Evening Post, *and* New York American. *Later he served as executive editor for book publishing houses, first with Stackpole Sons, then with Howell, Soskin. He is at present associated with the Book-of-the-Month Club. When Mr. Soskin wrote the following essay he was literary editor of the* New York Post, *a position that required him to write reviews of a number of books every day in the week.*

29. The Business of Book Reviewing

Since I believe thoroughly in the immediately utilitarian aspect of any editorial assignment, in serving the particular public and the special tone of the medium for which one writes, I cannot generalize very easily regarding the functions of the book reviewer for the daily newspaper. His function will vary according to the paper. His first duty, it seems to me, is a newspaperman's duty—that of writing a column which will stand on its own legs as an informative, entertaining contribution to his paper. If I were a managing editor and could not find a man to write such a feature, I would eliminate the book column entirely.

It makes no more sense to write analyses of Proustian fiction for the readers of the *New York Daily News* than it does to write libertarian-anarchist pieces for the readers of the *Herald Tribune* or Marxist dialectics for *The New Yorker.* In order to make newspaper sense, the reviewer must, in other words, reach some sort of compromise with his personal standards, modulate and vary his tone, and have respect for the instrument upon which he is performing.

With that fundamental consideration in mind, I find that reviewers' obligations and duties fall into a number of categories:

1. The reviewer owes it to his public to keep them informed regarding the most important, most timely, most entertaining books published from day to day. He must write of these books so that any given reader, though he may be interested in the comment, will not be misled into reading a work which will not suit his taste. The reviewer must, at the same time, suggest the spirit or the special distinction of a book in so marked a fashion that those of his readers who are qualified will recognize the work as their special interest. All that seems rather obvious and elementary. Actually it is one of the most difficult of newspaper assignments. It involves reviewing a book in the spirit in which it was written, maintaining a certain degree of critical detachment, and keeping the review always within the understanding of the general reader who appreciates very little of the specific subject involved.

2. The reviewer owes it to the author of a work under consideration and to the body of criticism of which his work, no matter how transient and immediate it may be, becomes a part, to suggest the significance of the book in the contemporary literary pattern. He should be able to transmit whatever genuine excitement he may feel regarding the book to his public. On the other hand he should be free to slam where the slamming is needed.

Here the reviewer's personal prejudices and tastes are, of course, a problem. If he remains an innocuous backslapper his authority is emasculated in short order. He must assume the role of the critic to a certain extent; but I think that his criticism, because of the special nature of his position as a newspaper writer who reflects the daily run of books, must be governed by a catholic taste and a versatile mind. The newspaper critic who holds Sinclair Lewis up to Nobel Prize standards, even when the man writes a light and deliberately effervescent book, is writing in a vacuum. The reviewer who cannot afford to forget the ghosts of Fielding, Thackeray, Jane Austen, and Dickens every time he reviews an English novel, or who must drag in the absolute Joycean or Proustian standards every time a harmlessly bright young person produces a story moderately affected by the literary gods, is something of an unimaginative ass.

I have read dozens of articles on "Are Reviewers Critics?" Most of them forget the fact that a genuinely cultured person can accept the present merits and the present excitements of a seasonal flow of books, or plays, or music, without for a moment polluting his basic feelings regarding Shelley, Molière, and Bach. To the question, "Are Reviewers Critics?" I would answer that they are more than critics. They are writers who have to combine the purely literary critical function with other complex functions as daily, utilitarian writers. If the reviewer is too much of a critic, too much of an absolutist, too much of an eccentric who exercises his prejudices and peculiarly personal tastes in public, he is bound to fail. If, on the other hand, he acquires the habit of merely reporting on books and avoiding critical statement he will lose the individuality and the personal touch which are essential in newspaper columning.

It is also part of the reviewer's job, I think, to work with the conditions of the publishing industry in mind. The mar-

keting of books is so organized that the national popularity of a given work depends, to some extent, on its reception in the newspapers. It is therefore essential that a book be reviewed and started on its happy or dismal career promptly. A few weeks' delay is often enough to kill a book's prospects, regardless of its merits. Here, too, however, the reviewer must make something of a compromise, or he will find himself overwhelmed by commercial consideration in the treatment of books, no matter how pure his heart.

I have held editorial positions on all sorts of newspapers and in all branches of the amazingly complex organization that produces the daily newspaper. I have never found a task quite so involved as this business of book reviewing.

MAXWELL GEISMAR *is one of the leading American literary critics of the younger generation. Born in New York City in 1909, Mr. Geismar took his bachelor's and master's degrees at Columbia, and later taught at Harvard and Sarah Lawrence College. He has done much book-reviewing for such publications as the* Saturday Review of Literature, *the* New York Herald Tribune, *and the* New York Times. *But Mr. Geismar's primary concern has been with the detached and systematic analysis of literature that is the task of the critic of letters. He contributed the chapter on contemporary fiction to "The Literary History of the United States" (1948). At present he is at work on a series that will deal with the noted American novelists from 1860 to 1940. Two of these volumes have already been published: "Writers in Crisis" (1942) and "The Last of the Provincials" (1947).*

30. Prisoner of Letters

Literary criticism is not a path to fame or fortune in the United States today. The practice of it involves something else—an interest in the field itself, a sense of necessity, or a personal commitment.

"Listen, my friend," Willa Cather once wrote, "no man can give himself heart and soul to one thing while in the back of his mind he cherishes a desire, a secret hope for something very different." But unfortunately that last sacrifice, that giving of oneself altogether and finally which Miss Cather

described as the condition of any serious enterprise, implies a certain restriction of personal freedom. More recently, in the American edition of André Gide's "Journals," there is an admirable account of an artist's struggle for discipline: the curiosity, the patience, the final passion which, as Henry James suggested, are implicit in the role of the critic when it is seriously undertaken. Oh, yes, very true, a solace, and a source of guidance—but what about the shock to the nervous system, the wear and tear on the physical organs which are also involved in the solitary struggle for perfection? Could one really issue a confidential memorandum on the price of immortality, or describe that odious routine of wounds and shrugs, of blows to one's vanity and one's pocketbook alike, which is the ordinary milieu of an appointment with destiny? The literary critic, like any other scholar or artist, attempts to preserve the past and to illuminate the future in a specific area of activity. But the present is usually devoted to maintaining a mere semblance of health or sanity in his own life and work.

Moreover, the somewhat superstitious reverence with which some people still regard this profession is largely dissipated when they learn that a literary critic is neither a museum piece nor a journalist. The typical figures in the European tradition, such as a Taine or Sainte-Beuve, were active cultural influences. Before the great fortunes were established in our own society, the American scholar was still considered as deserving, if not honor, at least a room and board; and even in the opening decades of this century, the literary critic spoke as a reputable member of the community. In our own time, the literary renascence of the 1920's was accompanied by a vigorous group of esthetic historians and theoreticians. Such figures as Randolph Bourne, Waldo Frank, Paul Rosenfeld, Carl Van Doren, and Lewis Mumford, to mention only a few names, were active forces in the development of a new body of literature that, whatever its defects, as H. L. Mencken

said, would at least be "a faithful reflection of the national life." Yet among the surviving members of this group, there are only two or three, particularly Edmund Wilson in the field of literary criticism proper and Van Wyck Brooks in the field of literary history, who have consistently followed their earlier interests. The others, talented and versatile as they were, turned their energies into other areas—biography, political or cultural history, scholarly research, or journalism—so that it almost seemed that literary criticism in the United States was a springboard rather than a great tradition. Meanwhile the advocates of "pure" literary criticism, that is to say, the semanticists, the analysts of technique, the practitioners of a rigorous but self-contained type of textual analysis, have come into power. The interest in promoting a fresh and vital body of native literature has been converted into a meticulous study of the classics.

However, I feel a note of self-righteousness in these general remarks about the state of literary criticism today, and perhaps an undertone of dismay and deception. The editors of *SRL* have asked for a statement of my work habits and I don't see why I should make a fool of myself in public. What I propose to describe instead—since the essential thing about work habits is to have them—is something that might be called methods of work, with the idea that one device or another may be of interest to readers or other writers.

The most difficult phase of my own work is actually reading the books of the authors whom I write about, and I know that other members of my profession have the same trouble. Is there something about the climate of a competitive society that makes reading—during the daytime when ordinary people go to work—seem absolutely immoral, or worse yet, a waste of time? Perhaps that is one reason I make so many notes, in the hope that working with my hands will compensate for working with my mind. In the case of Theodore Dreiser, who is my

present subject, there are at least three hundred pages of notes, while the final essay should run from eighty to one hundred pages. These extra pages of notes are just so much extra bother; they represent examples of the novelist's work that can't be used, or repetitions of things that have been said before, or divergent themes in his books, or paradoxes and contradictions in his thinking. They are variations from the normal range of his writing.

But what is the norm? There is some value in taking notes, compulsive as their compilation may be, and painful as their exorcism is in the final draft. By their sheer weight and volume, as it were, and by the constant repetition of an author's favorite themes, phrases, personal predilections and points of view, as well as certain instinctive gestures and attitudes that occur throughout a writer's work, they establish his central values, his temperamental responses, his technical equipment; the subject matter and the tone, in short, of his books. All that is left—provided that one has really read the works of an author completely and honestly and "innocently" enough, and has not merely paraphrased one's own convictions or the opinions of others—is to write the essay.

In my own case I have often noticed a curious moment of optimism and despair at this point. Everything is there for the essay, and it is always better than when it is expressed, simply because it is everything, and what one expresses is only *something*. One could often express the exact opposite with almost if not quite as much validity. It is the question of degree, of emphasis that is essential to catch in the work of any novelist; it is those very paradoxes, contradictions, and divergencies that make his work interesting; it is the extra pages of notes, the notes that one cannot use, that flutter around in the corners of my mind as I write. Write? Well, as I draw up an outline, just as they teach you in English 1, and set out, A, B, C, D, the themes and subordinate themes

I intend to express, although any resemblance to the final essay may be purely coincidental.

For certain themes or central ideas "prove themselves" in the writing of the essay while others don't. It may be that the idea is accurate enough but that the illustrations of it in the author's books are not convincing. Or that both the idea and the elaboration are right but not *as* right as an alternative idea; there is the question of emphasis again. Or it may be simply that the idea is wrong, after all. And after one has spent a week or longer in the attempt to clarify and develop it, with sharper and sharper phrases and an increasing sense of uneasiness and irritation, with the increasing conviction from somewhere in the middle area of the digestive system that the idea is wrong, one simply says to hell with it. Meanwhile, certain ideas or insights that have not appeared to advantage in the preliminary notes, begin to intrude themselves with more and more authority in the actual writing; they insist they belong there, that they be represented somehow, and then, with the same sinking feeling in the middle area, one goes back to the beginning of the essay to see if it can be changed. Those familiar romantic authors who used to insist that their novels really wrote themselves had a point, but they never explained what a disagreeable point it was: the cause of ulcers as well as art. I would frankly prefer to be a man who knew what he was writing about.

How I envy, too, those literary critics who can say just what they mean, immediately, and even verbally; who can render a considered judgment of any literary problem within the purlieus of parlor conversation, authoritatively and with a touch of hauteur as to the rather simple-minded and grubby American novelists with whom I happen to be dealing. After all, if one has been dealing with Kafka or Flaubert's technique . . . poor Sherwood Anderson, poor, poor Dreiser. I see them at their desks, these firm, decisive literary men of action,

enunciating their polished phrases while they fold their gloves. And I think of the pages of verbal hysteria that comprise what I call a first draft of an essay.

There may be sense in not putting down a thought in final form, however, until you know that you really have a thought. It is hard to throw away a good phrase even when it is not quite accurate, and I have noticed that the best literary journalists or book reviewers allow their thinking to follow their writing. H. L. Mencken is perhaps the classic example of a man's style being the man; and this is still one secret of becoming a high-priced columnist or a literary editor. There is a point also, during the immediate process of writing, in letting the mind bring up everything it can in the way of implications and associations, even though these come in the form of half-thoughts, verbal flashes, incomplete or distorted images. Let it all come, as it comes, get it all out, and then go back and see what is there, and select—and select.

All the same, it is difficult for me even now to look at those first drafts, which I keep, I suppose, out of some obscure tendency of masochism. A year or so ago a friend of mine in the South asked for one of these drafts to help him in his own writing; he returned the manuscript quickly but I have hardly heard from him since. A little later I was forced to go through one of these original drafts in order to verify the sources of quotations I had used. The sources were listed there, but it was easier, or at least lots more pleasant, to search through the pages of the published books from which the quotations had been taken. I hesitate to add that I have three or four drafts of each essay or chapter that I have written, and that all of them run to about twice the length of the finished piece. But it is impossible for me really to cut and revise an essay, to see it from the *outside,* until I have been away from it for half a year or so, and have done something else meanwhile; and I have left out the final process of revision, which is simply

working over the final draft in terms of lesser elements of style—usually such words as "in," "of," "but," "and," "nevertheless," "however," "too," "also," "about," "with," "among"—until the book has been published.

During the course of these remarks, I have been aware of the critics who remarked that Thomas Wolfe's "Story of a Novel," for instance, was not a statement of how he wrote his books but a confession of his inability to write them. Well, perhaps so; nevertheless they were written. I am sure that other writers can do better than I have done, too, but the value of a group of essays such as these must be in their description of methods of writing as they operate in each case, the way things really are. I remember Melville's account, both in his letters and in "Pierre," of feeling like a moose, hamstrung, while writing "Moby Dick," of those deadly feelings of faintness, of writing blindly with his eyes turned away from the paper, thus unconsciously symbolizing the "hostile necessity," being a states-prisoner of letters. Even H. L. Mencken himself, in a weak moment, admitted the anguish of that point when the brain, as it were, "stands to one side and watches itself pitching and tossing, full of agony but essentially helpless," and when the writer, sitting there in his lonely room, "gnawing the handle of his pen, racked by his infernal quest, horribly bedeviled by incessant flashes of itching, toothache, eye-strain and evil conscience," makes atonement for the crime of being intelligent. I wish somebody would show me how to write more easily, instead of pointing out what still remains to be done.

For it would be pleasant to conclude with the statement that at least I can now read what I have already published without pain. I wish I could. I hope, however, when my series of books on the American novelists from 1860 to 1940 has been finished, to be able to return to each of the volumes and make them better. And perhaps this is the moment to mention that I am a literary critic of the historical school. As it happens, I

am interested in our social patterns, and especially in what has happened to the national character during the last fifty years of industrial concentration and monopoly capitalism. I am engaged in a project which is trying to evaluate the kind of life we have lived in the past through the work of major figures in our literature,—a literary record which may well turn out to be either a tribute to our hopes or an epitaph of our decline.

For I agree that a work of art is a separate identity, a particular and unique crystallization of experience achieved through a specific technique. But I see a supplementary, not a contradictory meaning in the fact that it is also the expression of a personality and the highest product of an environment. The real point of a work of art is indeed that it fuses and resolves all the forces around it, personal and general, into a unified experience. If a critic simply concerns himself with *how* this experience is transmuted into literature—the technical methods—he omits two-thirds of his proper subject matter, or of the work of art itself. Very likely, art is "aristocratic" in essence, that is to say, the record of special temperaments, or an aristocracy of talent. But it is ridiculous to confuse this with an aristocracy of social class. For the personality of the artist has always at its highest pitch represented a fusion of the common elements of the human race at a specific time: it is just this mixture, this opposition of elements, that makes a literary work complex and interesting.

Unfortunately, too, very few writers turn out a succession of masterpieces, while even their poorest works can give us useful information about themselves, their period, and people, as well as their art. The body of literature by our leading novelists from the beginnings to the present time forms a personal and intimate diary of the American mind during this period that we can find almost nowhere else. Perhaps the native novelist is not the *only* expert who is qualified to examine the souls and

life of a people. But at least, as Mark Twain said, he does not try to generalize the nation:

> No, he lays plainly before you the ways and speech and life of a few people grouped in a certain place—his own place—and that is one book. In time he and his brethren will report to you the life and the people of the whole nation . . . And when a thousand able novels have been written, there you will have the soul of the people, the life of the people, the speech of the people; and not anywhere else can these be had.

To get at the essence of a "thousand able novels," as well as the unusual novels, to preserve this material for common knowledge and illuminate it for the common good: that still seems to me a useful and appropriate function for one kind of literary critic today.

Theatre Criticism

RICHARD WATTS, JR. *(born in 1898 at Parkersburg, West Virginia) has been reporting on and criticizing the Broadway theatre since 1936. After four years at Columbia, Mr. Watts plunged into New York journalism, serving first on the staff of the* Brooklyn Times, *then on the Street and Smith publications, later on the* New York Herald Tribune. *He was motion picture critic for the* Herald Tribune *from 1924 to 1936 and its drama critic from 1936 to 1942; at present he covers the stage for the* New York Post-Home News.

31. A Drama Critic's Credo

Of the innumerable charges regularly leveled against newspaper drama critics, to me the most provocative is the contention that they are not properly objective. They are, it is said, too intensely personal in their judgments, too lacking in an ability to render verdicts based on Olympian detachment and austere standards. It is further alleged that they are violent egotists who, instead of contemplating the works of, say, Norman Krasna in the light of Aristotle's laws, habitually air their prejudices, talk about themselves and their personal interests, exercise their phobias, and generally behave as if they were temperamental performers bent on giving a show of their own instead of reviewing the shows of other fellows. The final proof of their degradation is supposed to be that they are perfectly

willing to sacrifice truth and justice in the interest of making what used to be known as a wisecrack.

With most of the criticism of critics I find myself in rather embarrassing accord; but this charge seems to me to miss the point completely. Frankly, I believe that we critics are performing our proper function when we drop any pretense at objectivity and indulge in the most personal kind of comment on the theatre and any other subject.

Journalistic critics frequently like to think of themselves as reporters, just like other newspapermen, except that their assignment is to cover the theatre instead of a police beat, Washington, or the United Nations. That they are chiefly reviewers, rather than critics, is certainly true, and there is no denying that one of their primary functions is to provide their readers with a report on what the new show is about, instead of merely expressing an opinion concerning its merits and likelihood of popular success. But the expression of opinion is also a vital part of their business. A newspaper is, among other things, meant to be read, and there is no escaping the fact that no one pays any attention to the reviewer who doesn't express opinions, and express them pretty vigorously. Even the people professionally concerned with the stage, the very ones who protest most strenuously against the critics' lack of objectivity, refuse to bother with those who are hesitant about saying what they think.

The reviewer who pretends to be objective is, to put it bluntly, being unfair to his readers. I realize that there are certain exact standards in dramatic criticism. For example, certain playwrights such as Shakespeare, Shaw, Chekhov, Ibsen, Sophocles, O'Casey, and O'Neill are, whatever the merits of various minor works of theirs may be, titans of the drama. For another example, Barrymore's Hamlet was indisputably better than Walter Hampden's, and any critic who attempts to deny it is either a numbskull or a charlatan. But in

general the qualities of plays and playwrights are matters of opinion rather than objective fact. The critic, whatever his training and knowledge of the drama, is merely a specialized playgoer. Although he goes in on passes, occupies good aisle seats, and gets paid for it, he watches a play and has a good or bad time just like any other playgoer. Also, like any other playgoer, he has an opinion, usually pretty violent, about the show. The only difference between him and the non-professional playgoer is that he is expected to rationalize his opinion, however he may have reached it.

One other similarity between the two types of playgoers is that their verdict on the play is based not only on whatever knowledge they may have of the theatre, but on their complete viewpoint on life and letters. The critic's general standards of taste and his outlook on the world about him play as much of a part in the formation of his opinion as his specific dramatic standards. Try as hard as he will, he is certain to get his personal prejudices into what he writes. The only fair and sensible thing for him to do is acknowledge them as frankly and completely as possible.

To become very personal about it: as a reviewer, I have a fondness for the Irish drama, feel that good looks are no handicap to a young actress, like melodramas and rather commonplace popular music, am suspicious of ballets and grand opera, and do not mind a bit of liberal preachment in my plays. I believe in confessing these and other articles of my artistic and political credo as outspokenly as possible, so that the reader, checking my prejudices with his own, can tell just how far he can go by my judgments. This may not make me a better critic, but I am convinced that it makes me a fairer guide for any readers I may have.

Although his opinions seem to me the most interesting part of what a critic has to say, it is also his duty to offer an adequate notion of what the play is about. I do not mean that he

should go in for telling the plot at any great length. That not only makes for dullness, since few critics have any notably skilful narrative style, but it interferes with the possible pleasure of the theatregoer, who may want to find out the details of the story for himself.

There is also an idea, frequently advanced by people of the theatre, that the reaction of the audience should be reported with thoroughness and respect. This is a notion which should be accepted by the critic only to a very limited extent. If the first-nighters are unusually ecstatic, exceptionally cold, or more than ordinarily impolite—which would be quite a feat for any audience—the fact may be worth noting in the review. But as a rule, first-night audiences are so carefully hand-picked, their reaction to the proceedings is so studied and artificial, and because of their professional connections they are so frequently hypocritical in their behavior, that it is generally an utter waste of time for the critic to bother about their conduct. A cheap and obvious play is far more likely to be appreciated by first-nighters than a play that has something unusual to say in form or idea.

There is a widely held belief that a higher standard of reviewing would prevail if the critics were not so pressed for time, if they had twenty-four hours in which to mull over their ideas about a new play, instead of rushing to the typewriter to record them immediately. This I consider decidedly dubious. The fact is that it rarely takes any playgoer, professional or paying guest, long to make up his mind whether or not he likes the play he is seeing. It is a matter of immediate impact. It does take considerably longer to set down the quality of the work and the reasons for one's judgment, but to do that is merely a knack which anyone with the briefest newspaper experience can readily pick up. Moreover, there is undoubtedly value in the record of a critic's immediate reaction to a drama set down in the first white heat of admiration or disgust. The

sober second thoughts, if any, can be recorded in the reviewer's week-end column, after he has had time for ivory-tower reflection.

The chief difficulty about the hasty writing of a review, besides what it does to one's prose style, lies in the matter of emphasis. Let me again use a personal example. When Philip Barry's metaphysical dramatic parable "Here Come the Clowns" opened some years ago, I found myself admiring it more than I had any of Mr. Barry's previous plays, but various points in its later sections dissatisfied and disturbed me. When I read over my review the following morning, it struck me that while I had said everything I wanted to about the play's virtues and weaknesses, I had perhaps laid too much stress on the frailties; the notice did not sound quite as favorable as I had intended. So I went to see the play again and wrote a second review. In it I said virtually the same things I had before, but I put the emphasis more strongly on the virtues, with the result that the total impression it gave was far more enthusiastic. I still regret that I didn't write the second review the first time, but, inasmuch as the reservations were so strongly in my mind at the time I rushed to the office, I think there was value in that earlier reaction and that it was worth reporting. Furthermore, if I had written my first-night notice twenty-four or more hours later, I suspect it would have taken the same tone, since the weaknesses would have continued to bother me until I had described them in print.

The idea of delaying publication of reviews for twenty-four hours after the opening night has been tried upon two occasions in the New York press. The first case was that of St. John Ervine, the British playwright, critic, and scold, who was brought to these shores by the defunct *New York World*. Mr. Ervine was given a day to brood over his verdicts, and the result was what I believe has come to be recognized as some of the dullest and most unperceptive reviews ever printed.

More recently, the late newspaper *PM* decided, for mechanical reasons, that Louis Kronenberger's reviews should appear two days after the opening. In this case the result was a succession of strikingly thoughtful, exceptionally intelligent notices—indeed the only ones which, day in and day out, deserved to be classed essentially as criticism rather than reviewing. Thus the two cases seem to represent a standoff on the question of how delay helps the critic in his work. It happens, however, that during other parts of their careers both Mr. Ervine and Mr. Kronenberger did reviews which appeared the day after the opening and both demonstrated the identical qualities they showed when given the time to reflect.

The virtue of having reviews printed the day after the opening is that it emphasizes the fact that the theatre is news. The man who reads journalistic drama criticism wants to know about the show which opened last night and know about it without delay, and, since it doesn't harm the quality of the criticism, there is no reason not to give it to him. Nor is the hardship it works upon the critic exactly oppressive, even if at times he is hurried a little bit too much for comfort.

Now to get back to that tradition about critics being willing to sacrifice a good play to a witty line. To this I can only say that I have known some critics in my time who struck me as incompetent, but none who did not love the theatre too much and value his critical standards too selfishly to commit such malfeasance. As much as he may like to crack a joke, the reviewer is even more anxious to discover something good.

The truth is that we who write about the theatre are far gentler toward plays and far more generous with our praise than anyone else concerned with the stage. If you want to hear really violent condemnation of a drama, I suggest you eavesdrop on a group of actors, producers, or playwrights at Sardi's or "21" after an opening. They have just come from backstage where they flattered the star outrageously, and here over

a drink, they tell their cronies what they actually think! It has been my experience, and I think it is that of all my colleagues, that far more readers write in to denounce us when we praise a play than when we pan it. After all, we are causing people to pay good money for shows we have seen on passes, and when they are disappointed they certainly take it out on us.

The suspicion that critics are excessively fond of bright lines arises in part from the necessity for their putting on a good show of their own in their reviews. The critic *should* be intelligent in his judgments, but he *must* be readable. And there is no doubt that people prefer to read and invariably cherish the knocks rather than the boosts. The ads may quote the reviewers who bestow kind words, but the public quotes the man who says something sharply nasty, even if it isn't exceptionally witty. This does make it tempting for the critic to write biting things, but there are so many bad plays and incompetent performances that he does not have to use them on the few worth commendation.

Most certainly the drama critic should say bright and amusing things whenever he can. His job is something more than merely reviewing plays as they open, contemplating trends, and estimating the virtues and defects of passing playwrights and actors. He should keep the reader interested not only in the play under discussion—which he can do by either praising it with a certain amount of gusto, or taking it apart with some trace of bitterness or humor—but in the theatre as an institution. I don't know that I or any of my colleagues are skilful enough to do so, but a properly able reviewer can discuss a dramatic season in which he has felt called upon to castigate everything that has come along and still make it seem that, bad as things may be at the moment, the theatre itself is capable of greatness and magic. Unless he makes you feel that the stage is worth the attention and appreciation of intelligent people, despite its frailties, he is doing but part of

his job. And if he isn't lively enough to give a passably good show, the reader is right in not bothering about him. The critic has no more right to be dull than a playwright.

It is sometimes urged that there ought to be a fairly rapid turnover of drama critics; that a reviewer, after a few years, gets jaded and contemptuous of the theatre and comes not to like anything. It seems to me that this is nonsense. Any critic, if he ever has shown signs of ability, is a far better one after he has become mellowed, filled with a fuller understanding of his job, and provided with a practical background of his subject. It is said that reviewers get tired of their jobs. Well, some of them do, but then they quit. I have never known a critic of long standing who didn't genuinely love the theatre, and that goes very strongly for such presumptive theatre-haters as George Jean Nathan and the late Percy Hammond. As for the belief that the younger critic is filled with an enthusiasm that his elders lack, it is even more nonsensical. The young critic is generally convinced that he must show he is on the job by attacking almost everything, and especially by putting established talents in their place. It is the experienced critic who knows the value of appreciation and praise properly bestowed.

There are, however, at least two pitfalls which may trap a veteran critic. One is that he may grow either too rigid or too tolerant in his judgment. The other is that he may grow too narrow in his general outlook. Of the two, the second strikes me as the more dangerous. One of the unfortunate facts about the American theatre is that, whether he wants it or not, the New York drama critic possesses tremendous power. He possesses it because, in spite of the classic examples of successes he has denounced and flops he has praised, producers continue to bow too readily to his adverse notices and fail to put up a proper fight against them. Because of this power and the tendency of everyone concerned with the stage to think of nothing else, the critic is always in danger of getting delusions

of grandeur about both himself and the theatre. The stage becomes the center of his universe. His criticism becomes divorced from the world at large, and exists in a cultural vacuum. The drama should be a dynamic thing which, however timeless in subject matter it presumes to be, draws its strength from the life of the nation and the world from which it stems. Ivory-tower criticism of it is unhealthy and soon loses touch with reality.

To prevent himself from becoming inbred and narrow in what he has to say of the theatre, it seems to me that the critic should travel as much and as frequently as he can. He should make an effort to keep in touch with what is going on in other parts of the world, and particularly in the other arts. I have been frequently accused of using my columns to discuss matters that have to do with the theatre but vaguely, and I confess that I may go too far in that direction. But I still think that the idea is right, that criticism which uses the stage as a springboard for a contemplation of the world is, in the end, the healthiest and most valid kind.

As for the matter of making the standards of one's criticism too rigid or too tolerant, I can only say that the price of avoiding either extreme is eternal vigilance. If the critic is to be of any value to the theatre and his audience, it is sheer cowardice if he tries to avoid being a cheerleader for what he admires. The reviewer who can't appreciate good trash, while still knowing and reporting that it is trash, is, I say dogmatically, a bad critic, and so is a reviewer who is afraid of praise or who lets it run away from him.

On the other hand, if a critic doesn't have fairly stringent standards, his praise is worthless, whether it is expended on good things or bad. Too great tolerance is something to be guarded against, for it tends to corrupt both the critic and the theatre upon which he uses it. There is at least one time when a critic should be really bitter. It is bad enough to be tolerant

of a harmlessly bad show, but when a playwright or actor presents something that cheapens the theatre, to be gentle to him is the really critical sin against the Holy Ghost. Finally, there is the temptation to be kind to good or ambitious intentions. The author who shoots at the moon and misses surely deserves more admiration than the fellow who attempts easier targets; but, while giving him all his due, it has to be reported that he has missed.

It is an axiom of the theatre that the only good critic is the dead critic. By the very nature of our jobs we are not popular fellows, but there is no profession that is more fun and has better hours.

Art and Music Criticism

ALFRED FRANKENSTEIN *(born 1906) is one of the few American critics who have concerned themselves equally with music and the visual arts. A native of Chicago, he studied at Yale and the University of Chicago, receiving a Ph.B. degree from the latter institution in 1932. Mr. Frankenstein's career has been divided between teaching and journalism: he has taught music and art at the University of Chicago, the University of California, and Mills College, and has written about the two fields for the Review of Reviews Corporation, the* Chicago American, *the* Magazine of Art, *and the* Musical Quarterly. *Recently he has been doing research on the work of American still-life painters of the nineteenth century on a grant from the Guggenheim Foundation. Mr. Frankenstein has been music and art editor of the* San Francisco Chronicle *since 1934.*

32. Appraising Music and the Visual Arts

The editors of *SRL* have posed three questions regarding criticism which they have asked me to answer in the light of my experience as a newspaper reviewer of music and the visual arts. These questions are:

1. What do you feel you and other critics can—and do—accomplish in your work?

2. What problems do you and other critics frequently encounter in your work?

3. How do you, as one critic, go about solving these problems?

These questions and, inevitably, the answers to them, are all bound up with each other. One cannot define what criticism does, or can do, without at the same time defining its problems and suggesting the solutions to such of them as can be solved. Consequently I shall not attempt to handle the three questions in strict succession.

To know what criticism is, or ought to be, one need only ask what the history of art is. The history of art—using the phrase in its broadest sense, to include all the separate arts—is a record of creative personalities moulded by each other and by various circumstances of time and place. The creative personality is paramount; no one writes the history of music in terms of conductors and pianists or the history of painting in terms of dealers. It follows, then, that criticism should be primarily concerned with the creative personalities of the time and place which are of first importance to the critic himself and to his readers—their own.

For a long time past, especially in music and the visual arts, there has been a pronounced lag between the accomplishment of the creative personality and the willingness or ability of the contemporary public to accept his work. It is the function of criticism to close that gap, to speed the process of acceptance, to bring the artist and his contemporary audience closer and more quickly together.

This places upon the critic the charge of knowing what is going on, and of remaining perennially curious about it. Such perennial curiosity is not easy to maintain, and perhaps no one should be allowed to practise criticism past the age of forty. The trouble is that after fifteen or twenty years in this business, you are not good for anything else. (There are those who would remove the final word from that last sentence.)

All of the foregoing is simple enough. Unfortunately, how-

ever, the very same historic development which has brought about the widening gap between the artist and his public has also robbed the critic of all his standards except one, which happens to be the slipperiest and most problematical standard of all.

In a recent article in the *Chicago Review*, Elder Olsen observes that revolt in the arts is always against conventions, never against principles. This is a comforting thought, but it is largely illusory. It may be true, as Olsen points out, that Beethoven's revolt was directed against certain superficial features of eighteenth-century sonata form, but Beethoven did not revolt against tonality. Tonality was, for Beethoven and for all the musicians of his time, a principle; to regard it as anything else robs the very concept of principle of all its meaning. But today we can get along without tonality quite successfully; it is one of several acceptable methods of musical organization. In other words, yesterday's eternal principle is today's convention, and since criticism must inevitably follow along behind creation (but not, one hopes, quite so far behind as public acceptance), the result is that yesterday's criticism, based on yesterday's eternal principles, is likely to be fantastically if not ludicrously wrong.

Wrong in whose terms? The answer to that question contains exactly everything that criticism has to go on today.

The learned critic of the *Journal des Artistes* who wrote that Cézanne's first exhibition, held at Ambroise Vollard's gallery in Paris in 1895, was "a nightmarish apparition of atrocities in oil, eclipsing even legally authorized outrages" thought he was right, and there were thousands of his contemporaries to proclaim him right. Today he is wrong; if he is not wrong, then the whole history of art for the past half-century is a fraud and a farce. He is wrong because experienced and perceptive men came shortly to realize—some of them, in fact, made this realization at the time—that Cézanne was a great master, and

the experience of the world since 1895 has confirmed their view.

General agreement among the experienced and perceptive, ultimately confirmed on broader levels, is all that contemporary criticism can hope for. This may seem to be a rather desperate, cornered assertion, but actually it isn't, for meaningful criticism has never attained its meaning in any other way.

It follows, then, that criticism is not a science, and the effort to reduce it to a science is one of the wildest and most deplorable aberrations into which the human mind has ever fallen. For science implies objective verification, and esthetic perception cannot be verified objectively. But one must not fall into the hopelessly and meaninglessly relativistic attitude of assuming that esthetic perception cannot be verified at all. It must be verified in terms of general agreement, immediate or ultimate; otherwise mankind is a chaos of private, uncommunicating worlds.

Other problems of criticism and their solutions are largely on technical levels, and some of them really have nothing to do with criticism as such, but with the journalistic aspects of our job.

There are fashions in criticism, just as there are fashions in art, and fashions in both fields are closely related. Impressionist criticism was the vogue twenty or thirty years ago. The aim was not so much to say whether or not a thing had value as to say what it was like. This was usually done in fancy language; Lawrence Gilman, Paul Rosenfeld, and James Gibbons Huneker were masters of the purple patch. Our generation is much less likely to indulge in polyphonic prose, but we have inherited one thing from the attitude of the older school: we are not likely to take our stand, clean and clear, on questions of value-judgment, and tend to hide our appraisals under the disguise of description or historic placement. Some contemporary

critics go so far as to pretend that they make no value-judgments at all, but they do; they can't help themselves.

The worst problem of musical criticism is that most of it has very little to do with music. Ninety-eight per cent of the time we are reviewers of conductors, pianists, and opera singers. Now, performance is an art, and is therefore justly the subject of criticism, but performers and their repertoires don't change a great deal from year to year. Reviewing them the first time is easy. The second time it is not so easy, and by the tenth time you are ready to go out of your mind. In New York this problem is automatically solved by large staffs of critics, who take on the concert artists in rotation and so preserve their sanity, but out in the provinces it is acute and very annoying.

The worst problem of criticism in the visual arts is the group exhibition. Artists have a way of showing their works in packs. They will hang examples of 200 to 1000 different styles all at once, and you are supposed to say something intelligent about the result.

The solution to that one is simple the first time, but only the first time. "This is Art, 1949," you say, and you proceed to write a review analyzing the trends and tendencies perceptible in the exhibition. But six weeks later you get Art, 1949, all over again with a different (but, alas, not *too* different) set of specimens. Ultimately you find yourself making frantic little marks in catalogues, and your review is a mere awarding of verbal blue ribbons. You hate yourself for this because you know you are pontificating—and the next time you send your assistant to the group show.

The main problem of journalism in the arts, as opposed to criticism, is that the social and economic position of artists in every field is often extremely unfavorable, and this has most unfortunate results for the art as well as its practitioners. Music and painting are subject to all manner of rackets, abuses, and economic fancywork; criticism, or, rather, the

critics, can and ought to speak out against these things and use the influence of the press for their amelioration. Critics have done much less along this line than they should, but their word can be very effective when it is spoken in the right way at the right time.

Ordinarily when one talks about critics and criticism one means the critics and criticism of the daily press. There is, of course, criticism of many other kinds, and for the critic of the newspaper to function in these other ways provides extremely valuable experience for him. There is more to music and there is more to art than what happens, through sheer accident, to be offered through the concert halls and picture galleries of any city. I have found it worth while to balance the inevitable lopsidedness of journalistic experience through college teaching, writing symphonic program notes, and, more recently, through historical research.

In my own case, straddling two fields has been peculiarly fortunate. To be sure, it tends to split one's personality, and what one learns in the one field does not help a bit in the other. Quite the contrary; the deeper I go into music and the visual arts, the less unity I see between them, and the more suspicious I grow of efforts to relate them. Speculations about the unity of the arts always end up with the idea that art is the organization of experience; hence all the arts must follow the same laws. This is like saying that, because science is the recording of observed fact, astronomy and pathology are identical. Such basic unities as there may be between the arts are very simple. They are projections of the fact that the human mind is born with a passion for order but is catapulted into a disorderly world. But once you have said that, you have said it all, and the rest is neither interesting nor important. No. Being a music critic doesn't help you to be an art critic or vice-versa. But each field provides absorbing relaxation from the other.

The criticism of music and the visual arts in the United

States is full of oddities and paradoxes, but the greatest paradox of all is this: since music and the visual arts are regarded by editors as highly specialized areas of interest attracting only small minorities, criticism in these fields is confined very largely to the most broadly scaled and popular of all publication media, the daily newspapers. It is, to be sure, practiced in the weekly reviews as well, but in a relatively starved and restricted fashion. Elsewhere it is scarcely to be found at all.

The weeklies which are not news reviews, such as *Collier's* and the *Saturday Evening Post*, will occasionally carry personality sketches about musicians and artists, invariably written from the same angle: fantastic as it may seem, these strange characters make a lot of money. The intellectual monthlies are scarcely more intelligent. It is eminently characteristic of their slant that the *Atlantic Monthly* recently brought out excerpts from Prokofieff's autobiography dealing with events of his childhood. That composer's ideas about music, or an article about his achievement as a whole or any phase of it, would not be considered by the same publication. Neither are such things printed by weeklies like *The Nation* or *The New Republic;* they can be found only in professional journals and ordinary dailies. Yet the intellectual weeklies and monthlies publish literary criticism and exercises in literary history by the long ton.

The cause of this limitation is to be found in the assumptions and prejudices on which higher education is based.

In the collected works of Oscar Wilde one may read the following priceless footnote: "In the field of music, Richard Strauss has done for "Salome" what Wilde has accomplished for the same theme in the domain of the intellect." The equation is complete and its exclusion is watertight: the intellect is engaged solely by words printed on a page, and whatever may be engaged by sounds or colors is something else again.

Strangely enough, this antediluvian attitude has been adopted by the powers that be in America's high-toned press only in rather recent years. Half a century ago *The Atlantic*, for example, carried as much on music and the visual arts as on literature. Today magazines of that class are known in either field for only one thing—they initiated the generalized, grouchy, and ill-informed attack on modern painting which is now seeping down to more popular levels. Yet these very attacks may signify an eventual awakening to reality. When a publication has for years ignored a major human expression such as music or art—ignored it in all its forms, historic as well as contemporary—it can salve its conscience if it can demonstrate, to its own satisfaction, that at least a large part of that expression is not worth while; at the same time, the very fact that a publication reveals that it worries about certain things is evidence that it is aware of them. Twenty years ago, the intellectual press did not even know that music and pictures exist at all.

There is evidence, also, that the universities are beginning to look at their music and art departments as something a little more important than trade schools which have, rather embarrassingly, attached themselves to citadels of learning. Some day a university president is going to discover what the general public has known for a very long time: that Beethoven and Rembrandt are as important as Shakespeare and Kant, and this will eventually open the columns of the more important magazines to Stravinsky and Picasso.

Another observation of some importance, quite unrelated to the foregoing, is that criticism in the daily press is never better than the daily press as a whole. The tendency toward monopoly and chain operation in the American newspaper industry has done criticism no good. When a newspaper is run from an office a thousand miles away, it has no stake in the cultural life of the community it serves, and criticism is

not likely to be practiced very successfully in its columns. When a newspaper is intimately tied in with the total community organism, its museums, symphony orchestras, and other educational institutions will be of much greater concern to it, and its critical departments, accordingly, will be much more dynamically conducted. The New York newspapers everyone reads for criticism are two completely independent institutions, the *Times* and the *Herald Tribune.*

At a recent congress of music critics, Olin Downes made a plea for more jobs for more men on more newspapers. His point was that musical criticism is too strongly centralized. So is the entire economic setup of all the arts in this country. But there are not and will not be more jobs for journalistic specialists in any one art. Combine a few interests, and maybe you'll have a chance. The painters will say you're a good music critic and the musicians will admire your art criticism, but all of them will be right there on your doorstep when they want to get something into your paper.

Editorial Writing

HERBERT BRUCKER *is editor of the* Hartford Courant. *Born in Passaic, New Jersey, in 1898, he did undergraduate work at Williams College and graduate work in journalism at Columbia before joining the staff of the* New York World *in 1925. He was a member of the editorial staffs of* World's Work *and* Review of Reviews *magazines, 1926 to 1932. In the latter year he joined the faculty of the Columbia School of Journalism, becoming a full professor before he left to join the* Hartford Courant *in 1944. He is the author of "The Changing American Newspaper" (1937) and "Freedom of Information" (1948).*

33. Newspapers and the Prophet Motive

Not long ago Thomas E. Murphy, a colleague of mine on the *Hartford Courant*, was slightly nauseated by the circumstances and trappings of Lana Turner's fourth wedding. He sat down and pounded out an editorial describing a Hollywood wedding that was only a slight caricature of the real thing. It told how one Lulubelle Parsnips gave a blow-by-blow account of lovely Bunsyn Burner's twelfth trip up the aisle. The groom, Wally Wopping, was "scion of an old family that could trace its bank account back to the First World War." The flower girls, named Beryl, Cheryl, Meryl, and Zeryl, were daughters of the bride by previous marriages.

Within twenty-four hours Mr. Murphy had experienced most of the delights and some of the anguish that can befall a newspaper editorial writer. He had, it goes without saying, a lot of fun writing his editorial. He felt a little of the sense of divine mission that exhilarated the prophets of old as they cautioned mankind about its foibles. He enjoyed the compliments many readers showered upon him. But also just about every movie-house manager in town called on the front office to inquire, in considerable annoyance, what the *Courant* had against Hollywood. This kind of thing hurt business, they said, and to them that was all that mattered.

I have suggested that editorial writers serve the same purpose as did the prophets of ancient Israel. The late Talcott Williams, editor of the *Philadelphia Press*, and first head of what is now the Graduate School of Journalism at Columbia University, used to quote Ezekiel to drive home the newspaperman's obligation to society: to "blow the trumpet, and warn the people."

It may seem overdoing it to liken the wage-slaves of the capitalist press to prophets. Some years ago the Continuing Study of the Advertising Research Foundation began to survey the reading habits of newspaper purchasers. The first 104 papers studied showed that 17 to 77 per cent of men readers paid some attention to the editorials, 9 to 63 per cent of the women. Taking the median figures as convenient guides, it seems safe to say that about 49 per cent of our men and 29 per cent of our women read at least one editorial for each copy of a newspaper they buy.

By contrast 80 per cent of the men, and 78 per cent of the women, read comics. Eighty per cent of the men read sports news or pictures, and 84 per cent of the women read society news or pictures. As a clincher to show what people do when they are really interested, 94 per cent of the women read local advertising.

Despite these hardly comforting figures, the fact remains that the people need someone to blow the trumpet. And they are guided, far more than they realize, by editorials. They are guided, that is, in the aggregate. When an editorial steps on the toes of a particular individual or vested interest, a storm is certain to follow—as the theatre managers' resentment at the Lana Turner editorial showed.

Though he may keep it dark, the editorial writer enjoys sitting in daily judgment on mankind. Since the news on which he comments consists of the unusual and the disagreeable in life far more often than the normal and the pleasant, editorials more often call on the people to repent rather than to rejoice. Our journalistic prophets tend to be Jeremiahs.

Regrettably, the high calling of prophet to the twentieth century puts on most editorial writers a burden heavier than they can carry. The necessity for commenting each day on the significant, the spectacular, and the purely decorative aspects of the current scene calls for more knowledge, time, and energy than they possess. There are fewer editorial writers than there used to be who are broken-down reporters turned out to pasture. They should of course have the discipline of reporting, of having to recount the facts as they are, before being allowed to express opinions. They should keep up with the current magazines and books, and match what they find in them against at least some insight into the experience of the ages. But even that is not enough. The editorial writer ought to come down out of the ivory tower to see for himself what is going on outside, in the streets and in the council chambers. Unfortunately, there is never enough time.

Besides, few newspapers maintain an editorial-writing staff big enough to do the job right. Indeed, only the metropolitan dailies have adequate resources. *The New York Times,* for example, has six full-time men, plus reasonably regular production from Anne O'Hare McCormick, columnist and au-

thority on foreign affairs, and Waldemar Kaempffert, science editor. Last year no less than sixty *Times* reporters and editors other than the regular editorial writers contributed 500 editorials. The *New York Herald Tribune*, using fewer occasional writers, has nine full-time men. The *Post-Dispatch* in St. Louis, which consistently turns out as hard-hitting an editorial page as any, has six. The *Christian Science Monitor* has four full-time and one part-time editorial writer. Occasionally it gets editorials from others on its staff or from the outside. The *Richmond Times-Dispatch,* a somewhat smaller paper, has three regular writers.

On the majority of newspapers, which are quite small, a single man writes all the editorials, with occasional outside assistance. Small wonder that at times their editorials resemble the ones J. Donald Ferguson, editor of the *Milwaukee Journal*, says he wrote in his early days on a country weekly. In sheer self-defense against the pressure of time, he would steal editorials bodily from his more fortunate big-city colleagues. At the beginning he would write, "The *New York Times*, from its vantage point looking over the world, says . . ." Scissors and paste provided the body of the editorial, which ended with some original comment like, "With this view we surely agree," sometimes varied to read, "The remarks of the *New York Times* are asinine."

Most editorial writers are so busy that they stay in their offices, read the headlines, and say what they can about the news. No wonder the product is often dreary. Too many of our editorial pages are journalistic quick lunches, manned by short-order essayists. There is a preponderance of editorials on political and economic happenings, important no doubt but often ignored by the crowd as remote from daily life. What ought to be incisive opinion all too often turns out to be a collection of clichés. What can you say that's new about Palestine, or Russia, or the town pump, when you've said it all

before? It is an appalling experience for an editorial writer to read any list of bromides. There, staring him in the face, is his guilt. In the daily grind he uses shopworn phrases instead of sharp-edged words that give precise form to what he wants to say. Is it any wonder that editorials are read by only 49 per cent of the men and 29 per cent of the women?

On the few fortunate newspapers that have several workers in their editorial cubbyholes, there naturally tends to be a division of labor. Each man usually writes on those subjects which attract him, or about which he is particularly informed. And every newspaper of any size has what might be called a Do-Good Editor. He is the typewriter virtuoso who plugs the Boy Scouts, the Community Chest, and the Cancer Drive. His is a duty of labor rather than of love. But some of his editorials touch hearts and open pocketbooks.

The individual flavor and point of view that frequently characterize the products of well-staffed editorial shops sometimes arouse in the public a curiosity as to who wrote a particular editorial. The horsewhips and pistols that were once standard office equipment for Southern editors are gone. But irate citizens still come in, breathing fire that will not be quenched until the wretch who wrote that piece has been confronted with his sin.

This conception of the newspaper editorial as merely the whim of one individual leads many readers to the notion that editorials should be signed. The late New York newspaper *PM* acceded to this view. Superficially it may seem a liberal policy, a concession to the fact that newspaper editorial opinion sometimes has less authority behind it than its anonymous dignity indicates. But doesn't an editorial lose something when it becomes merely one man's hunch? Our columnists, home-grown or syndicated, give us more than enough of that.

Newspaper editorials should rather reflect the corporate

personality of the journal in which they appear. My own paper, the *Courant*, has survived many battles in its 185 years. We who write for it today feel the shadow of the early Federalist editors over our shoulders. We know that the radical Abraham Lincoln was once its hero. We also feel the reflexes of the old guard Republicanism of the early 1900's, and throughout the nearly two centuries runs a stubborn streak of Yankee individualism. All these elements form a tradition that will color what we shall write tomorrow.

It is possible, of course, for a change in management to change a paper, as when Joseph Pulitzer's *World* vanished into the *World-Telegram*. But under ideal conditions what a paper says is not just an owner's or an editor's or an editorial writer's personal opinion. It is a corporate entity made up of an understanding of the community, a sense of responsibility, and a yen to fight for the underdog. Above all, it must be seasoned with the local flavor. Only if an editorial writer knows his own Main Street will his readers heed what he says about Washington and Moscow. But if he does, his paper assumes a personality of its own. The whole is greater than the sum of its parts. An editorial page is bigger than the individuals who happen to be writing it at any given time.

As I have suggested, this is an ideal, an ideal not always easy to attain. Every newspaper, every editor, and every editorial writer is constantly subjected to a myriad of pressures, many of them unseen and many not even consciously realized. Among these are pressures of the status quo, the economic forces of the community, the closeness of the ownership to one side or another in the local political and social push and pull. These are the forces that the great journalist of the *Louisville Courier-Journal*, the late Henry Watterson, had in mind when he defined a good editor as "a man of outstanding talent, who owns a majority of his newspaper's stock."

Today few editors and certainly no mere editorial writers

own a majority of their paper's stock. There is scarcely a newspaperman who can be completely independent of the social and economic pressures of his community. I have already cited one example of such pressure—the indignation of the theatre-owners over the Lana Turner editorial. Another, if I may draw on the experience of my own paper once more, was what happened when the *Courant* commented on birth control. Connecticut is one of two among the forty-eight states that do not permit physicians to prescribe contraceptives, even when the life of the mother is in danger. Anyone may buy them at any drugstore; but medical science is forbidden to advise their use to save health or life.

When a bill to wipe out this anachronism was introduced in the Connecticut General Assembly, the *Courant* resolved to break the long-respected taboo against newspaper mention of the subject. In a three-paragraph editorial it sought to leave to one side all the storms of controversy that beat about the subject, simply explaining the bill's purpose. Immediately all hell broke loose. The telephone kept ringing in what was obviously an organized campaign of vituperation. The paper was denounced from the pulpit. Church dignitaries ostentatiously canceled their subscriptions. They tried to find out through the back door which individual had written the editorial. And two succeeding editorials, while the bill was before the legislature, brought equal abuse.

No wonder editorial writers sometimes find it convenient to let touchy local subjects alone. All too frequently they concern themselves with topics that are eminently safe or distant. Recently Jenkin Lloyd Jones, editor of the *Tulsa Tribune*, cast a professional eye over the editorial pages of the Middle West. He found a widespread tendency to deplore juvenile delinquency. "But who in hell is in favor of juvenile delinquency?" he asked his fellow editors at the annual meeting of the American Society of Newspaper Editors. Many newspaper editorial

writers take refuge in what Mr. Jones calls "Afghanistanism." They can pontificate on what is happening in Afghanistan with perfect safety. "No one knows more than you do about it," said Mr. Jones, "and no one gives a damn."

To write a good editorial requires guts as well as skill. There is a local milk strike—what are you going to say about it? The drivers have many friends—and not only in the union ranks, either. But you also have to live in the same town with the companies. They are less numerous than the drivers, but they too have friends, powerful ones who have no doubts about where all right-thinking men stand in any quarrel between management and labor, no matter what the facts may be.

But if you know your facts and weigh them honestly, the rewards for coming out into the open with what you know to be right are great. Since I came to the *Courant* four years ago, I have seen the validity of that principle demonstrated a number of times. Consider, for example, the matter of Hartford's government. When I arrived in the city I found considerable agreement that the municipal government was antiquated and inefficient. But there was even wider agreement that—Hartford being Hartford—nothing could be done about it. The community is amazingly ready for technological change. But its zeal for improvement in industrial methods and gadgets is matched by a distrust of anything new in social and political institutions. When it was suggested that the city ought to adopt the council-manager form of government that has proven effective in other American cities, the idea was deprecated as visionary.

Just the same, the editorial columns of the *Courant* and Hartford's other newspaper, the *Times*, vigorously fanned every flicker of hope and systematically demolished the arguments of the opposition. As the crusade gained strength, the diehards, and still more the political groups who stood to lose if businesslike efficiency replaced overlapping boards and

commissions and politics, swung into action. For more than a year the fur flew. But in the end the people of the city endorsed the change, two to one. Hartford got its nonpartisan council and city manager last January. It is generally agreed that the support and leadership of the newspapers was the catalyst that brought success.

The rewards for editorial courage can be great. But all too often we editors take an easier way. We become mouthpieces for the opinions of others. Even worse, we become the slaves of our own prejudices. It is amusing, and sad, to see an editorial writer whose personal venom as expressed in print has been challenged digging earnestly for arguments to hurl back at the opposition. Too many editorial writers get their opinions first, and then look around for facts to prop them up.

Obviously no newspaper can discharge its duty as a twentieth-century prophet if its editors fall into such myopic ways. All life is change. It is the prophet's business to be sensitive to life, to be able to distinguish the enduring values of the past from mere nostalgia for the old days, and the promised land from the gold brick. There is no substitute for digging up the facts first, before forming opinions. Honest study, a scientist's humility before the facts, no matter how they may fly in the face of cherished beliefs and sacred cows, will reveal the truth. If one does not manipulate the facts with conscious purpose, they have a way of arranging themselves into a pattern that makes the opinion decent men must hold about them perfectly clear.

It is, I think, the failure of editors to make an objective search after truth the basis of each day's writing that accounts for much of the American people's current dissatisfaction with their press. Theoretically, we have in this country a press that is completely free. This notion was born when economic conditions were less rigorous, when anybody and his brother could afford to start a newspaper. Nowadays it takes more than

all the millions of Marshall Field to start a successful newspaper. In place of a multiplicity of newspapers, each speaking for it faction, we have only one or two per community. Even New York, Chicago, and Boston boast only a handful each.

While this economic change was occurring, a number of diverse national influences were building up, brick by brick, the tradition that news reporting should be impartial. If any two citizens or groups of citizens are at odds, the press now recognizes its obligation to report fairly what each says. So strong has this still incomplete tradition grown already that we are incensed when a newspaper departs from it by slanting the news. What now needs to be done—and I think is slowly being done—is to establish a comparable tradition for editorial writing.

One not insignificant barrier to objective editorial writing is the habit many newspapers have of attaching themselves to one of the major political parties. This is a hang-over from the days when there were many papers, each speaking for a particular faction. Today, when we have few papers, it is their obligation not to be a Dr. Goebbels for any group, however praiseworthy, but to speak for the whole community.

If editorial writers are really to fill their roles as twentieth-century prophets, they must wherever necessary forget allegiances to the party names and shibboleths. They must speak more and more for the whole community, and less and less for any party or class. After all, the number of independent voters is growing. Some of them still proudly belong to a party, from inheritance or from preference. But it is the people whose minds are free who decide elections. They are the ones who keep the country on the high road of its destiny, while the two parties seek constantly to push it first to one side and then to the other. It is the main stream that counts. And it is the task of the editorial writer to keep us there.

In calling for editorial objectivity, I do not mean that our editorials should be milk-and-water double talk, full of ifs, buts, and on-the-other-hands. Our journalistic Jeremiahs must breathe more hellfire and damnation than ever. Only they need to get all the facts, and not just some of them, first.

Column Writing

JOHN MASON BROWN *(born 1900) has been a critic, teacher, lecturer, and writer on the theatre ever since his graduation from Harvard in 1923. After a year on the* Boston Transcript, *he became associate editor and drama critic on* Theatre Arts Monthly. *In 1929, he went to the* New York Post *as drama critic; later, in 1941, he moved to the* New York World-Telegram *in a similar capacity. His dozen books, on the theatre, on literature, and on his war experiences, have added to his devoted following. As a lyceum and forum lecturer—his delivery is very swift and physically active, and punctuated with keen witticisms—he has won great popularity in all parts of the country. After the war, during which he served as a lieutenant in the Navy, Mr. Brown conducted the CBS radio program, "Of Men and Books." In 1944, he joined the staff of the* Saturday Review of Literature *as an associate editor; his column, "Seeing Things," is a weekly feature of* SRL.

34. Pleasant Agony

For four and a half years now, mine has been the privilege, hence the pleasant agony, of filling the pages of a department for *The Saturday Review* each week, or almost every week. I say pleasant agony because I know of no other words with which to describe what writing is to me.

I claim no singularity in this. There may be, there must be, writers to whom writing comes as effortlessly as breathing.

There may even be (though I doubt it) writers whose happiness is complete while they are actually writing. But most of us who live by putting words together are not so fortunate. We are tortured while we write and would be tortured were we not allowed to do so. Although when we are done we feel "delivered," as Sainte-Beuve put it, this delirium of delivery is not accomplished without labor pains for which medicine has, as yet, provided no soothing drugs. If all attempts to coerce words into doing what we would have them do are at best painful pleasures, the pains and pleasures of summoning the right words to meet a weekly deadline are of a special kind.

A cook faced with getting dinner when lunch is over knows something of the routine, if not all the anguishes, of a columnist. No mortals, however, have appetite as insatiable as a column's. A column is an omnivorous beast. Its hunger is never appeased. Feed it, and almost at once it demands to be fed again.

Though he used a different image to express this same idea, even Shaw, seemingly the most easeful of writers, knew this. When he abandoned the job of drama critic on London's *Saturday Review,* he protested against the weekly deadlines which had confronted him for nearly four years. He likened himself to a man fighting a windmill. "I have hardly time," wrote he, "to stagger to my feet from the knock-down blow of one sail, when the next strikes me down."

His successor in the same job on that same fortunate magazine shared an identical dislike of deadlines. For twelve years, Max Beerbohm admitted in his valedictory article, Thursdays had been for him the least pleasant day of the week. Why Thursday? Because that was the day, the latest possible one, he set aside each week to get his writing done. On each Wednesday, therefore, he would be engulfed by "a certain sense of oppression, of misgiving, even of dread." It was only on

Friday, when once the danger was passed, that the sun would shine again. Then he would move on dancing feet.

Beerbohm ascribed his disrelish for the act of writing to "the acute literary conscience" with which he had been cursed. It was this conscience, he maintained, which kept his pen from ever running away with him. I know what he means. Unblessed with any of his gifts, I am none the less cursed with something of his conscience. Beerbohm insisted that "to seem to write with ease and delight is one of the duties which a writer owes to his readers." If he worked hard at his sentences, it was because Beerbohm hoped they would read easily. In other words, he was in complete agreement with Sheridan's "easy writing's vile hard reading."

There is a passage in "The Goncourt Journals" which has haunted me since I read it. Envy has kept it green for me, and wonder (or is it disbelief?) has kept it alive. I have in mind Gautier's boast that he never thought about what he was going to write. "I take up my pen," he explained, "and write. I am a man of letters and am presumed to know my job. . . . I throw my sentences into the air and I can be sure that they will come down on their feet, like cats. . . . Look here: here's my script: not a word blotted."

When I think of the one-legged kittens that land on my pages; when I remember the false starts, illegible scribblings, unfinished sentences, discarded drafts, changed constructions, and altered words which mark my beginnings, my continuings, and my endings, I blush with shame and, like the voyagers in Dante's realm, abandon all hope.

In these journalistic days the first word that pops into an author's mind is held to be the acceptable, if not the best, word. We are supposed to smile because Wordsworth, at a day's end, was wearied from his quest for the exact word. But where Wordsworth the man may win a smile, Wordsworth the writer, fatiguing himself by doing what is a writer's duty, is far from

laughable. The *mot juste* is not just any word. Even if it eludes its pursuer, the search for it seems to me to remain among the obligations of authorship. Indeed, the true hope of anyone who loves the language and respects it is to stumble upon, not the correct word or phrase, but the word or phrase which is so right that it seems inevitable.

The word and the phrase are not the only hurdles—and joys—of authorship. The sentence and the paragraph, by means of which points are made, thoughts communicated, emotions transferred, pictures painted, personalities caught, rhythms established, and cadences varied, offer other challenges and should supply their own sources of delight and pride.

One of the modern world's luckier occurrences was what happened at Harrow when a boy named Winston Churchill was being "menaced with Education." Three times, he tells us in "A Roving Commission," his backwardness as a classical scholar forced him to remain in the same form and hence repeat the same elementary course in English. "Thus," writes he (and who can question him?), "I got into my bones the essential structure of the ordinary British sentence—which is a noble thing. . . . Naturally I am biased in favor of boys learning English. I would make them all learn English: and then I would let the clever ones learn Latin as an honor, and Greek as a treat. But the only thing I would whip them for would be for not knowing English. I would whip them hard for that." One trembles to think how many of us whose profession is writing would be flogged today if lapses in English, or American, were whippable offenses.

Later on in that same grand book, Churchill has his more precise say on the subtleties, intricacies, and possibilities of the writer's craft. It is his opinion, and one worth heeding, that, "just as the sentence contains one idea in all its fulness, so the paragraph should embrace a distinct episode; and as

sentences should follow one another in harmonious sequence, so the paragraphs must fit on to one another like the automatic couplings of railway carriages."

Style is a strange and mysterious thing. Some contemporary writers appear to get along without it and to want to do so, and most of us rightly disparage it when it shows the effort that has gone into it. Few of us, for example, can read Pater today without being irritated and put off by the deliberate intricacies and involutions of his sentences. His style, once held to be a model, remains a model, although as we see it it is one to be avoided rather than followed. Pater could not bring himself to say a simple thing simply. His orchestration is so elaborate that the melody of his thought is lost.

Hazlitt comes closer to present-day tastes. More than being the enemy of the gaudy and "Occult" schools of writing, Hazlitt was not only a champion but at his best a matchless practitioner of "The Familiar Style." Although he had the art to make a long sentence seem short, he knew the value of short sentences. "I hate anything," wrote he, "that occupies more space than it is worth. I hate to see a load of band-boxes go along the street, and I hate to see a parcel of big words without any meaning in them."

The perpetual challenge of writing, the challenge presented by each new sentence is to say exactly what one wants to say exactly as one wants to say it. This is where the anguish of composition mixes with the delights. This is where, too, style, as I see it, comes into the picture. Style is merely the means, chosen or instinctive (doubtless both), by which a writer has his precise say.

Certainly, style is not affectation. Conscious though it may be, when self-conscious it is an obstruction. Its purpose, to my way of thinking, is to give the reader pleasure by sparing him the work which the writer is duty-bound to have done for him. Writers, notwithstanding their hopes or ambitions,

may or may not be artists. But there is no excuse for their not being artisans. The style is the man, we are told. True in the final and spiritual sense as this is, style is more than that. It is the writing man *in print.* It is, so to speak, his written voice and, if it is truly his voice, even in print it should be his and his alone. The closer it comes to the illusion of speech, perhaps the better. Yet the closeness of the written word to the spoken can, and in fact should, never be more than an illusion. For the point of the written word is planning, as surely as the charm of the spoken one is its lack of it.

Without shame I confess that, regardless of how unsatisfactory the results may be, I labor when writing these weekly pieces to lighten the labor of those who may read them. That I fail again and again I know to my own chagrin, but I can honestly say I try. I not only rewrite; I often rewrite and rewrite again. I do this though I am well aware that the result is sentences and paragraphs which do not bear rereading. I rewrite partly in longhand, partly by dictation, occasionally sitting down, sometimes walking, but most often snaking my way across the floor on my stomach. My desk, a migratory one, is the small piece of beaverboard I push before me. On it are sheets of typewriter paper darkened with hieroglyphics which must be deciphered immediately to be read at all.

Endeavoring to square my writing with my writing conscience, and having to live with the difference between what I would like to have done and am able to do, is one of the reasons why writing is to me an agony, however pleasant. There are other contributors to the pleasures and the agonies of trying to keep these columns fed. Time is one of these; time in the sense that it confronts a writer for a magazine with a special problem.

Newspapermen, accustomed to meeting daily deadlines, must think it absurd for a fellow on a weekly to mention time at all. Compared to the one frantic hour, or even two or three

hours, of enforced fluency at their disposal, the seven long days I have, if need be, in which to do my stint must seem to the daily boys the lifespan of a Methuselah. No wonder they might be inclined to sneer at me for daring to speak of pressure, or mutter, "How much time does he want? What does he think he's writing anyway?"

Once I would have shared their astonishment, had anyone told me it could take the better (or is it the worse?) part of a week to get a review done. Once I would have laughed at a schedule so leisurely and a pace so snail-like. But that would have been during those thirteen hard-driven years before the war when, in ways at present mysterious to me, I also managed to meet daily deadlines, first on the *New York Evening Post* and later on the *World-Telegram*. Now, however, I know that, as surely as the daily journalist fights against the clock, the weekly journalist must contend with the calendar. Both are the victims of time, the one because of having too little, the other because of having too much (though never enough).

Poverty might but horses could not drag me back to daily reviewing or newspaper work. Or, for that matter, to writing only about the theatre. My debt to the *SRL* is a genuine one. The *SRL* has relieved me from the constabulary duties which must be done, night after night, for the theatre's sake as well as the public's, and which my confreres perform with incredible patience and skill. It has spared me from having to sit before those dreary ineptitudes, those costly and dispiriting barbiturates, those utter time-wasters and monumental bores which seem bound to form so large a percentage of every season's offerings.

It has allowed me to pick and choose, to write about only the better plays or those which, though failures, were interesting in their faults. Above all, it has not limited me to the theatre. Each week it has left the choice of subject up to me, and given me full latitude in everything I have written. Paren-

tal experiences, the more significant films, the Nuremberg trials, Ernie Pyle, the UN, Mayor La Guardia as a broadcaster, London revisited after the war, the plight of Negroes in Detroit or in a little town in Iowa, the comics, good conversation, a school teacher seen many years later, Addison and Steele, Woollcott, Edith Hamilton, Robert Sherwood, and Charles Lamb, even one of the Little Rollo books—the *SRL* has tolerated these and many other subjects from me under the heading of "Seeing Things."

If it were not that each week the writing of these pieces had to be done, I would have to thank the *SRL* for providing me with the ideal set-up. But the writing must be done, and trying to get it done in a manner that in any way justifies such freedom is where both the pleasure and the agony come in.

As impatient readers may have observed to their annoyance, I no longer try or want to write a review which is a notice and only that. If I lack the inclination to do so, I think I also lack the excuse. The cream of the news has been skimmed off long before I come to my desk and even longer before the *SRL* appears. My hope each week, even when "covering" a play, a movie, or a book, is to be led by the specific instance from the particular to the general. This means attempting (please note that I say *attempting*) to reflect as well as to react, to apply no less than to report, and to use a topic not as an end in itself but as a springboard to something larger. It means searching for the overtones, parallels, and implications suggested by a subject, and not limiting myself to the subject itself.

The real work of weekly columnizing lies, I find, not in the actual writing, hard as that is for me, but in the getting ready to write. In other words, it lies in the quest for a point of view, hence a point of departure, which is not dependent upon news as news. My deadline being what it is, I do not come to my typewriter hot from the thing seen, though naturally I struggle to retain or recapture something of that first heat. I have the

time to live with my reactions for two or three days and nights, to let them simmer in my thoughts, to rummage in my mind and memory for experiences or illustrations which have a bearing on the subject discussed.

If I dare to be discursive, my digressions are deliberate and to me relevant. Their aim is to widen the ripple of application, to extend the subject by following up the hints it has given. For what I struggle to write here each week is an article which, though it may not manage to become an essay, is in intention at least nearer to the essay-review than to the review.

Shaw in his reviewing days once insisted that the artist who accounted for his personal disparagement by alleging personal animosity on his part was quite right. "When people do less than their best, and do that less at once badly and self-complacently," he fumed with that delectable immoderation which can be his, "I hate them, I loathe them, detest them, long to tear them limb from limb and strew them in gobbets about the stage or platform." Shaw's point was that the man with a genuine critical spirit "becomes your personal enemy on the sole provocation of a bad performance, and will only be appeased by a good [one]."

Although I share his fierce point of view fiercely, and trust I remain the implacable foe of the bogus, the pretentious, the empty, and the mediocre, the longer I live the more convinced I am that the most challenging function of criticism is rising to appreciation rather than excelling at denunciation. It is easier by far to hold the attention while damning than when praising. If this were not true, so many conversationalists would not be considered witty whose sole equipment is malice. The bludgeon, the nightstick, the axe, the bazooka, and the flame-thrower are weapons every critic should have in his armory. But criticism of the arts, which as I see it is bound to be a criticism of life, would be a dull and sorry business were it prepared only to stalk, attack, and extinguish.

Although the heat of proper indignation or contempt is a heat both necessary and healthy, it is not by any means the only heat with which I, for one, would choose to have my copy warmed. There are the juices, the joys, the pains, the dilemmas of living, and something of these I wish I could capture. This is why the jargon of the so-called "new critics" repels me. It has no compassion, little humanity, and less gaiety. It is arid, bloodless, and absurdly, cloyingly over-specialized. It does not flow from the heart but trickles from the head, and only a small part of that. It is written from books rather than life; written, and most successfully written, to be unreadable.

I deplore this other approach to writing because I belong to a different, more conciliatory school. Without shame I confess I am a writer who would like to be readable and read. I do not ask or expect to be agreed with. The only truth I can state (and it takes struggling to get it half stated) is a personal one. Accordingly, I have no other choice than to write personally. What a man is is the basis of what he dreams and thinks, accepts and rejects, feels and perceives. It is, too, the stuff from which he writes. If he can speak with any accuracy for himself, he may speak with some accuracy for others. But only if he interests them. It is in the hard, hard rockpile labor of seeking to win, hold, or deserve a reader's interest that the pleasant agony of writing again comes in.

3

THE WRITER'S OPPORTUNITY

CONRAD AIKEN *(born 1889) has written novels, short stories, and criticism, but he is best known as a poet. A native of Savannah, Georgia, he was raised by an aunt in New Bedford, Massachusetts. After graduating from Harvard in 1911, he devoted himself to writing, a career made possible by the possession of a small income. Many of the poems in his score of volumes of verse reveal the influence of the Imagists. His "Selected Poems," published in 1929, won him the Pulitzer Prize that year. In such novels as "Blue Voyage" (1927) and "Great Circle" (1933) a Joycean influence is apparent. Before World War II Aiken lived for a while in England, but he is now back in Massachusetts, where most of his creative work has been done.*

35. The Great Audience Is Ready

I suppose it is true beyond question that never before in history has there been a time or place when the average writer was so materially prosperous as he is now in America. Opportunity is not merely abundant—it might almost be said to be overwhelming. The list of publishing houses grows every day; it is innumerable, but even so it cannot keep up with the appetite of a reading public which grows still faster; and in this situation the demand for new authors far exceeds the supply.

The author thus finds himself in the enviable position of being actually courted by the publisher: editors vie with one

another to add his name to their lists: they even on occasion have been known to dangle huge sums of money before him, to be paid in advance for a book as yet unwritten, an idea that is still embryonic. Nor is this state of things limited solely to the realm of fiction. It is just as true of biography and history, of the humorous book and the anthology—it can even at times embrace literary criticism and philosophy.

And what is more, the publisher even stands ready to help the neophyte or amateur writer. American publishers pride themselves nowadays on their ability to take an unfinished or only partly successful manuscript and out of this raw material, with the aid of highly skilled editors and rewrite experts, coin the pure gold of a best seller. They have in a sense become literary factories, with a somewhat ominous assumption of authority: and of this rather mischievous influence on American writing we shall no doubt be hearing much more. But the point is that, along with the sale of cinema rights to Hollywood, or possible sale to any of the growing number of book clubs, or again to the publishing houses which specialize in cheap reprints, it is all part of the highly developed commercialization of writing which makes it nowadays an inviting and easy occupation. It is becoming only too apparent that almost anyone —with the publisher's assistance—can write a book and make money out of it.

In fact, it is *too* easy; and what results from this extraordinary situation is a kind of literary jungle. The proliferation of books, on the one hand, and of money, on the other, is gratifyingly exuberant, no doubt, but as in any other jungle it is more often the biggest than the best that gets to the top. The reasons for this are clear enough. The first and most important is the lack of any sufficient body of first-rate criticism. I do not mean by this that there is no first-rate criticism at all in America—there is. But it is very limited in quantity, and unfortunately it is almost entirely confined to the pages of very

small *avant-garde* periodicals of whose very existence the great reading public is unaware. These excellent critics not only therefore have no influence whatever, but they also naturally tend to become specialized—they write for each other, and for a handful of readers, and tend to ignore altogether the great muddy main stream of contemporary writing.

Their names do occasionally creep into the enormous commercial weeklies, but the editing of these papers is so capricious, and so wholly without any consistent and discriminating standards of esthetic or historical judgment, and so often subservient to the momentary necessities of mere journalism or advertising, that the true voice of criticism is hardly heard. The topical or popularly successful book must be given pride of place, even if it is commonplace, and reviewed by a second-rate or third-rate journalist-critic. The downright bad book, which does not deserve to be reviewed at all, will be allowed to crowd out a good book, merely because the publishers are spending a fortune in advertising it. In fact it must be admitted that the two reviews, which, with their huge circulations, are the most influential in America, make scarcely any attempt to guide and instruct the public taste: they merely follow it. Tacitly, at least, they appear to agree with the commercial publisher that you must give the public what it wants.

And of course, therefore, in this jungle, it is ordinarily the second-best that makes its way to the top of the "best-seller" list, or, if it happens to be a book by a really good writer, the probability is that it will not be his best work. The emphasis is on the showy, the spectacular, the sensational, rather than on the quietly reflective; on the quotidian rather than the profound. The writer must be a good showman, if he is to be financially successful, and he must keep half an eye on the public. This is not an ideal situation, granted. It means that even the best of contemporary American writers is constantly faced with the temptation to compromise a little, for the vast

rewards that are thus made easily available to him. It means again that the best of these, in turn—the quietest and truest of our poets and critics—will not compromise at all, or cannot, which is the same thing, and must therefore look elsewhere for their bread and butter. As such writers have always done, unless they are fortunate enough to inherit a small income; they become teachers, book reviewers, doctors, or simply live by their wits, and do their writing in their spare time. They can thus preserve their independence, and perhaps, too, they can pick up here and there a profitable editorial crumb which involves no spiritual surrender.

Nevertheless, this comparative seclusion of our best writers from the violent main stream is regrettable—it robs the main stream of a purifying current which it sorely needs, and it is sometimes apt to rob the writer himself of an energizing touch of the common clay which would make him whole. Perhaps I exaggerate this a little, and perhaps it is already ceasing to be true—for certainly, with any luck at all, nowadays, it is very hard indeed in America for a fine book of verse, or a fine new novel, to go entirely unnoticed or unrewarded. But that it can happen, and that allowance ought to be made for these exceptional instances, is perhaps attested to by the existence of so many prizes and fellowships for young writers and artists. And again, too, there is the new institution, which shows signs of becoming common, of the so-called "resident poet" at a university or school—the poet being simply invited to live in the university, and to keep "open house," and to teach, or not, as he pleases.

And this new institution is, I think, interesting for several reasons. For one thing, it is evidence of the growing, and indeed already widespread belief, that it is wholesomer for a society to have its poets inside it than outside. Perhaps to a European this will not seem so strange. But in America it is something new, and this deliberate attempt of the universities

to domesticate our poets, if not to tame them, and to bring them into a creative relationship with student audiences, is not only a radical cultural and educational departure, but is also significant of a very remarkable sociological change. By this I mean a sociological change in the status of the writer. It is hard to realize, too, how quickly this change has come about—it has happened only in the present century, if not indeed in the present generation: writers like myself who span the two centuries have seen it develop in their own lifetime. For, quite suddenly, it has become not only respectable to be a writer, but even honorable.

Perhaps one needs to be an American to understand it. One has to remember, and as it were with one's own roots in the American scene, how very short has been the interval between the first colonizations of the Atlantic Coast and the present moment. It is nothing at all—it is a mere lightning-flash of time: one has barely had time to step ashore, cut down trees, build a house, and turn around: and therefore every American remembers vividly, with the muscles of his hands just as much as with the words in his mouth, what it was to be a pioneer, an explorer, a frontiersman, but above all, and everywhere, the *practical man.* And of course the American colonists had to be practical or nothing. Anything else came to be despised: if one was not practical, one was really not quite masculine, not quite a man. Obviously, in such a society, there could not be much place for a writer: if he was considered at all, it was with amused contempt. As for the poet, he was beyond the social pale entirely. It was something to be ashamed of. He was queer, effeminate, the perfect incarnation of all that the practical man summed up and hated in the favorite American word, sissy. If the poet wasn't insane, at any rate he might just as well be dead.

And, as I say, this wholly natural frontiersman's contempt for the impractical poet—and let us here remember Arnold's

severity with Shelley—has always been an inevitable part of the American's heritage. But, as with all such vestigial inheritances from a passing phase of culture, it only needed to be recognized as such to disappear: and now, quite suddenly, it has disappeared. Not only is the writer, and even the poet, perhaps the poet most of all, now translated into respectability, but it is even suspected that he perhaps has some rare social function (far from being anti-social) which is as profound as it is mysterious. And accordingly, he must be got back into social circulation, so to speak, and he must be listened to. Above all, he must be listened to.

Well, this is a really tremendous change, and I think it would be impossible to exaggerate its importance not only for the American writer but for American culture. What we are witnessing is the beginning of a sort of love affair between the American public and its writers—only the beginning, yet, and as so often in young love a little blind, a little indiscriminate, even perhaps a little fatuous; but genuine and beautiful, just the same, and fraught with consequences that are incalculable. To have great poets—Walt Whitman said—there must be great audiences too. It is the great audience, the well-disposed audience, which has always been lacking in America—our poets and writers have had to stand alone, soliloquizing to a thousandfold imaginary reduplications of themselves. But now that is over. The great audience is ready, or almost ready; if we wait patiently for just a little while it may even turn out to be the greatest audience there has ever been, anywhere. This time, it will not be their fault if there are no great poets. And in this sense, I think the opportunity for the American writer is now unparalleled in all history.

Date Due

MAR 22 '54	MAR 8 '54		
FEB 1	MAR 11 '55		
MAY 3 1955	APR 26 '55		
NOV 16 '56	NOV 11 '58		
APR 2 1958	1958		
F APR 1			
FEB 5	'63 ML 23 '63		
FEB 23 '63	ML(F) SEP 20 '63		

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